Passing to Freedom: Willow and Weems

a novel

by Dest. Anto. Jones, of ShiraDest Publications

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Dedication: This novel is dedicated to the children served by *Bright Beginnings in DC*, via The ***Project Do Better by ShiraDest Publications Fund***, administered by the Greater Washington Community Foundation.

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Chapter 1

I had just put my Free Papers away, the growing gloom not admitting enough light to continue puzzling over the shapes. Then, in the distance, came the words that dragged my thoughts away from those welcome letters, making my blood run cold.

"There's that *Fancy*!"

I froze, rooted to the spot.

"Get her!"

Not again. The shouts grew louder, closer. I hugged the wall, wishing for the wood to swallow me, even drag me down to the pit. I wrapped my arms around my belly as tremors and nausea struggled for dominance. The stench from the canal didn't help.

There it was, that familiar pain. I clamped all of my muscles tight. I could hear feet running toward me in the gathering darkness, even as I stood stock still, knowing all was lost.

My friends had fled. Dropped their baskets and foolishly run along the canal, passing right in front of the President's House. I could hear their short strides crossing the road, heavy booted

feet pounding after them. That'd be Mary screaming. They told us to wait here, stay together, just present our papers if we were stopped. But who can blame her? Mary never really wanted to run. Just couldn't be parted with us both. So this is our fault.

My fault.

I knew they would know. Those Free Papers might do for a field hand, but never for a *Fancy*. The Senator would want *his Fancy* back. He would never let me go. But Mary and Sal were going, and I had no future, anyway. Little Sal was determined, and Mary would never let her leave alone. I couldn't blame her.

More screams, this time, the voice of little Sal. They were closer, now, and the sound of more constables, shouting, was joined by the rattling of a cart, moving fast enough to cover the sound of the horses hooves pulling our doom closer. My bowels threatened to spill over, watery humiliation gurgling as I clamped down tighter, recalling what had happened the last time.

Not to me, of course. Never. No marks could be made upon the Senator's *favorite*. But others could suffer, and to punish me, to show me never to run again, others had been made to pay for my mistakes. Even killed, to be sure that I would know, never leave again. Mary had explained it, as I wept for them:

"You know why they make us wear these fine dresses. Why they whip them, and not you. These white men, they want us because we look like ladies."

I had shaken my head at her, not wanting to believe that I was part of the game. A *willing* part, as long as I let him touch me.

"But Mary, we are still darkies. We are not white, that much is clear."

"Oh, it is clear, Honey. Our light skin lets them dress us up, lets them pretend that we are white women. What they want from them, but cannot have, they take from us."

A twig snapped near me. Someone was approaching. They had orders, we knew, not to damage us. It was our beauty that made us so prized on the auction block, often selling for more than a valuable field hand. Selling that beauty which had no good use. That beauty which had caused so much pain, and even death.

I unlaced my left hand sleeve. My beauty would no longer be used for evil.

This time, no one would die for my weakness. I pulled my embroidery scissors out of my basket, opening the blades as I found the longest vein on my left arm, glancing at my right. For once, it was good to have such light skin. In the right light, I could sometimes see where the veins ran from wrist to elbow. I'd looked so often I had them memorized. *No other slave will die because of me, be whipped to spare my flesh, to teach us all not to run. Only my blood will flow, this time*.

I pressed the open blade into my wrist, the other blade biting into my right hand fingers, drawing down along the tendon, welcoming the pain here, instead of down there. This pain told me, as I dug deeper, toward my elbow, that I had not submitted. This pain would wash away my shame, at last. No one else would suffer for me.

Not again.

A thin stream of blood began to drip from my left arm. Not enough. I held up my right arm, letting the sewing basket slide down to my shoulder, and pressed the blade into my right wrist. Now the open scissors bit into my left hand, but I was past feeling, anyway. By now, it was too dark to see any veins, so I'd just have to use the tendons as a guide, and pull that blade as hard as I could down toward my elbow, toward where my sewing basket hung on my shoulder, until I could dig no deeper.

Before the open scissor blade could bite into my flesh, a slender dark hand wrapped itself around mine.

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Chapter 2

… lightly, but firm enough to stay my hand against my own intent. I raised my eyes from the scissor blade. I glimpsed a knowing face, which had a finger to lips shaped the same as mine. That slender hand, covered in mud and ash, it seemed, belonged to a young boy with high cheekbones, almond eyes, skin almost as light as mine, and freckles. Was it my imagination, or did I see a twinkle in his eyes? We both ducked our heads, keeping as low and as still as we could. No hair showed beneath the driving cap, which was pulled down tightly over his face. This must be the Conductor we were told to wait for, just out of sight around the side of the President's House. He turned to lead me, still holding my hand, which still held my scissors, taking care not to make any noise. The boy stepped over the stick he must have snapped underfoot earlier, deliberately, I now understood. Looking under the wagon the whole time, he waved me over and helped me up and quietly over the side, tucking my dress and me under a thick shield of dried tobacco leaves and corn meal going to market.

"Keep still and stay down."

That whisper was not the sound of a young boy, but of a girl!

"We do this right, we both get free."

I thought it might take a miracle for us to get past those Constables. I could still hear poor Mary putting up such a racket that the entire Federal City must be able to hear her. The cart moved

a little ways, and then slowed and picked up again, as the voice of an elderly sounding gentleman called out, telling the coachman to drive on. I thanked both of our guardian angels, who must have remembered to be on duty tonight. Even more, the work of those good souls at Mount Zion church, for arranging all this, at great personal hazard. We drove for what seemed to be hours, not being stopped by anyone, I did not know why. I felt surely someone would have questioned us, by this time, but drive on we did, until I felt safe enough at last to breathe again. By the time my stomach began to growl, we'd slowed to a halt, and then, dried tobacco leaves began to part, freeing me to sit up and look around. And, of course, to thank my young benefactor. I'd not even had time to tend to my arm, but the bleeding had stopped long ago, as I lay still in the wagon. I smelled the fresh air of pine trees, and wondered just how far we had managed to come in the hours since leaving Washington City.

"Try to stay down."

The whisper seemed to have come from just beside me, as a hand holding a cloth with some corn bread reached over the side of the wagon toward me. That mysterious face popped up for just a moment.

"I have a travel pass, but we might have a hard time explaining why you are not a sack of corn meal."

The girl smiled, and I saw a flash of small white teeth, before we both ducked again, me to settle on the floor of the wagon, and her crouched down beside the wheel of our wagon, as best I

could tell. Our horse sounded like it was eating, too, and I was grateful for the calm. I wanted to at least thank this brave girl before we had to move on. I tilted my head up and whispered:

"Thank you for, you know…"

I didn't know what else to say. I'd clearly doubted that she would come as planned. I hoped she didn't feel insulted by my lack of faith.

An apple appeared, held in that slender hand, reaching over the side of the wagon like an olive branch. Another whisper floated up to me from over the side of the wagon.

"My name is Anna. Anna Marie Weems. What do they call you, besides *Fancy*?"

"The white folks call me Ann, but every body else calls me Willow."

"Willow, why's that?"

I got that pain in my belly again, and had to clamp my mouth shut tight to be sure something unpleasant didn't rush out. When Anna must have decided that I didn't wish to respond, she merely handed up a small ladle of water, dripping some of it on me as she held it over the side of the wagon. I was just starting to hope she'd forgotten her question, when I heard a sigh.

I've hurt her, too, and she has just saved me. Must I harm everyone I know?

I was searching for something to say, to smooth over my unintended insult, when the sound of hooves reached my ears.

Someone was riding hard down the road.

Toward us.

***

Chapter 3

“Be sure that they are taken unharmed. Especially the octoroon. I will have your hide if she is damaged in any way.”

He saw the pallor in the cracker’s face, and felt satisfied that he had been understood. That was how one had to deal with these lower men.

“Yes, Senator.”

A knock came at the door, and the Senator nodded to his valet to open it. A well-dressed white man pushed past the valet and strode into the room, clearly furious.

“They got away! My boys nearly had them, and they both got away!”

It was Price. The Senator rose to his feet, stubbing his cigar out as he rounded his desk to receive the odious but well-heeled speculator. The man was one of his constituents, and he wielded enough power in Montgomery County to warrant a certain level of courtesy. Not to mention being connected enough in the Federal City to make a convenient ally, for the moment.

“Charles. So, they are together, then. Did your boys actually see the two of them, or are they just, speculating?”

The look on Price’s face was precious, well worth any minor ire this self-important climber might keep toward him. In any case, every slave trader needed friends in high places. Friends like himself.

“No, Senator, my boys did not see either of them two gals, but they did get a report after they picked up your other two fancies. The constables saw a wagon leaving the President’s House just about the time my boys caught them gals, the old one and the pickaninny.”

The Senator blinked. Where was Ann? *I will have my Ann back, at any price.*

***

Chapter 4

The apple in my mouth turned to bile, as the smell of corn meal and tobacco leaves mingled with the odor of my own fear. My entire body began to tremble, my hand shaking almost uncontrollably. It moved as if of its own accord, seeking out the solace of my sewing basket. What I began hours ago, I would finish, now, before those horses arrived, carrying a far worse fate with them. I was drawing the scissors out of my basket when I saw a shadow fall across me. The moon had come out, and Anna had just stood up, still leaning against the wagon.

"Right on time."

She looked from my wide eyes to my sewing basket, nodding toward my still bloody left forearm.

"You didn't really think I'd stop here and just wait on those patrollers to come collect us up, now did you? Really? Miss Willow, you-"

The thundering of hooves drowned out the last of her words, but her eyes, and her down-turned mouth, told me all I needed to know. She seemed such a young thing, but held so much more wisdom than I'd yet learned. When, after all, could I ever have learned to trust my fate, given what I've seen of this world?

She touched me almost tenderly on the shoulder, bringing my thoughts back to the present.

“Do you know how to ride a horse?”

She looked at me, then glanced at the two white men who were now dismounting in front of the wagon. I shook my head no.

“Well, you will just have to learn something quick, because we are taking these two very good horses across country for a while, at least until we get out of Maryland, Delaware, too.”

“I heard we had to go all the way up to Canada now.”

I had no idea of what the new plan might be. I’d heard talk of a law that the Senator was proud to have forced through, buying him two horses for the price of one, some said. Coffles were no longer to be seen, chained misery shuffling up the Market Street from the Wharf, so that our good White citizens could look respectable in the eyes of those envoys sent from distant lands. Particularly the English. At the same time, any of us who managed to escape our bonds could now be safe only across the border from the land of our own birth, in British Canada.

“Yes, yes we do. And there we will go.”

She looked at me so steadily that I could feel my former mourning turning to hope, if not to joy, beneath her gaze. Just then, one of the white men cleared his throat. He was standing nose to nose, at the head of a horse, holding the reins of both the wagon and his horse.

Anna patted me on the shoulder, turned, and walked over to him, straight and tall. She now seemed to be far taller than she had first appeared. They exchanged a few words as they turned toward the second horse. Anna took the reins from the other white man. She showed no fear of them whatsoever, as if they had known each other for some time. She turned back to me, leading both horses over to the side of the wagon where I still sat, my head nearly level with the wagon's walls.

She switched the reins of both horses to her right hand, holding out her left to me, and I rose up, stepping over the side of the wagon, and down to the ground. It hadn't been nearly as far as I'd imagined. That wagon had been my world for some hours, but now it seemed small, fragile. Then I looked up at those horses, and I felt small, and fragile. *Gather up your courage, girl! Oh, Willow, don't you weep, either.* The song reminded me of Miss Mary, bringing my sorrow from yesterday back with it. *Not now. There is a time to mourn, and a time to dance. With horses, too.* I looked to see where the white men were. They were facing away from us, as respectful as could be. It was a wonder to me, though I was grateful. I gathered up the hem of my dress and bunched it around my waist. I felt indecent, but there was no help for it, if I didn't want to break my neck up on this huge beast. My head hardly reached the animal's back.

"I guess it's time for me to learn to love this horse. Miss Anna, will you teach me?"

I saw that twinkle in her eye, for sure, this time!

“I surely will, Miss Willow.”

And with that, she patted the saddle of the horse nearest me, “Her name is Mary,” bent down and touched my left foot, looking up at me.

“Put your foot in the stirrup, and I’ll catch you around the waist to help you up into the saddle.”

I nearly quailed:

“You mean I’m to ride like a man?”

I had no idea how I would ever stay on top of that horse, as big as he, I mean to say she, was.

“If you want to get away, yes Ma’am, you do. You might want to open your bodice a little, too, so you can breathe.”

One of the white men cleared his throat, just loud enough for us to notice. Time to get a move on. Then, as if she’d read my thoughts, she insisted.

“Time to get a move on, here, Miss Willow. You just trust me and Old Mary here. You’ll be fine, she won’t let you fall, and neither will I.”

For a moment, as I looked into her almond eyes, I thought I might just fall.

***

Chapter 5

We were on our way again, north.

We had agreed that it seemed safer to travel by night, despite my fear of getting lost.

Anna had shown me how to find the Pole star, explaining that we had come up 16th Street and out the Rockville Pike from the President's House. Now that we were off of the main roads, keeping a close watch on our direction and on how far we traveled each hour were very important. We had left Rockville heading North, and should cross into Pennsylvania after several days at this pace. Anna set a walking pace just quick enough not to tire Old Mary, but slow enough to talk quietly along the way. Pine needles underfoot muffled the sound of our travel as they perfumed our air. I'd never imagined how peaceful the woods could be.

"What did you notice on the way up here, while you were hiding in that wagon?"

Her whisper carried sweet and clear to me, just as my eyes had begun to close, Old Mary's steady rhythm lulling me half to sleep now that I'd grown used to her gait.

"Well, we seemed to be on a road the whole way, since we did not cross any water that I could hear. That must mean that we are in Maryland, now?"

Or so I fervently hoped. The Senator's lodgings were on the Virginia side of the Potomac, and I believed that my very bones, not to mention my belly, would tell me if we had gone back to that accursed Commonwealth. My young teacher would have to prove my senses right.

"Very good, Miss Willow, yes we are. We will make a coachman of you, yet."

I found myself blushing under her praise as if I were back with Miss Mary, just learning how to embroider my first flower. My Old Mary, here and now, seemed to be getting tired of our journey, straying every so often to the clumps of tall grass. We must all be hungry, now, but we kept going, a little slower, but steadily onward.

Anna nodded toward Old Mary:

"Why don't you give her head a little tug, to remind her that we can't stop to eat just yet."

I hated to do it, but a small pull on the reins was enough, and the horse kindly remembered that she was my mount, and must keep going. She was far more biddable than I had imagined any beast of this size could be.

Anna explained the new plan as we rode, or as she rode, rather, while I learned to keep my balance and not fall off of my mount. We would continue cutting across country for a while, in spite of the November cold, until we met a Dr. H. Anna would be his coachman, driving under the name of Joe Wright, up to Pennsylvania. I would have to continue hiding, but in a nicer

conveyance, this time. From there, we were to go through New York, and with the help of a Rev. Freeman, obtain our way into British Canada, and freedom.

"Will we have need of these horses for very long?"

I imagined that my poor horse must be as hungry as I was, chomping at her bit as she did. My dear Miss Mary's panic had changed our original escape plan, raising a ruckus as she had back at the President's House. Poor Mary and little Sal. But now was not yet the time to mourn for them. Now, all of Maryland would be looking for us. With the practiced hand of a slave trader like Charles Price still on our heels, as Anna had told me, and the Senator, to boot, there was no room for error. Not even for our poor horses.

"Don't you worry, they'll be alright."

How did she do that? I was glad to have Anna here to keep me from getting lost, both in my thoughts and in these woods.

Still, I fretted. *Will she really be able to teach me anything of use?* I had always been told that my embroidery, not even real needle work, was the only thing I could do. Nothing more. Not even sew any real clothing. Miss Mary always did that for me, to prevent my accidentally sticking myself with a sewing needle. I was surprised that they ever trusted me with a pair of scissors, but I could hardly ruin my teeth to cut off my embroidery floss, now, could I? So, I had been permitted

a tiny pair of scissors. Tiny, but still big enough to do the job I no longer wished to do. My left arm now bore the scar. That scar was my real name. My family name.

I had heard rumors about my family, from the older folks talking in the kitchen when they thought I wasn't listening. Some of the old folks said that I had a cousin, a brilliant quadroon named Miles Manzilla. Must have been, to have his own name. They said his daddy was a tithe-able slave, once owned by some Terrells or Cobbs, Quakers, a long time ago, around about the first war with Britain. Said he spoke three languages, just a child. The story was that this little boy was taken North and even freed by those Quakers years ago, but his people, daddy and an uncle named Lot and Jesse, stayed here in Virginia, Caroline County way. How they knew this I did not know, nor whether it was truth or tale. Old Mary tilted her head just a tad to the right for a moment, as if reminiscing along with me.

The Senator had bought me so long ago that I remembered nothing of my former life, home, or if I even had any family. A pain began, down in my belly. I had always belonged to that man, having grown up under his watchful eye. Had never known anything else. The trips with him to the Federal City always seemed long. He took me with him only when he had lengthy stretches of business to attend to in the Senate. It was one of these times that we were finally able to make a workable plan to get away. Or at least it had seemed workable. Work, it did not, for poor Miss Mary or for Little Sal.

Just as my thoughts were turning back to that melancholy scene, Anna broke through with her question:

"So, Miss Willow, do you ever intend to tell me why they call you by that name?"

That was a very good question, in point of fact. I wasn't sure whether I really had the right to answer, given the means by which I had obtained that particular name. But I also did not have the right to keep my young friend here in the dark, as our surroundings, both physical and spiritual, were already dark enough. So, I took a deep breath:

"Well, Miss Anna, I don't know if I'm the best placed to answer that question, truth be told."

She gave me a look that I could see in the dark. It was not a kindly look.

"Well, now that is a new one on me! If you don't want to tell me, then just say so, but I cannot fathom why you'd be ill placed to tell me about your own name."

She did not sound amused. Yet again, I had managed to insult someone I cared for, even if she did not yet know that.

"I have offended you, and I deeply regret it. But you must let me explain first. You see, my name, or as folks say my real name, was not given to me by just anyone."

"Well then who gave it to you?"

"Please don't take offense, and I mean this in all gravity."

“Then who?”

My hesitation only seemed to further insult her.

“I was named by an old, old tree.”

I felt it more than I saw it: Anna was so startled that she nearly fell off of her horse.

“You were named by a what?”

Her whisper was sharp enough to cut through a dry pork chop. Her amazement cut me to the bone. It was understandable. But still.

“I was named by a very old tree. In The Old Dominion, of course.”

“So, exactly how did that happen, Miss Willow? Did you hear a great rumbling voice speaking to you from out of the -”

She stopped speaking, giving me a look as if we were at Sunday meeting hearing of Moses and the Burning Bush. I began to laugh and had to stop myself, fearing that I might endanger our escape with too much mirth. I even began to feel hungry again.

“I believe that I had only just arrived in Virginia, the Senator having bought me from my first master, as far as I know.”

I stopped short as the pains in my stomach turned from hunger to nausea. Anna must have felt it, for her tone softened considerably.

“Do you recall your birth home, or your mother, at all, Miss Willow?

“No, Ma’am, I do not. Old Virginia is all I have ever known.”

I had to take a deep breath of Maryland air before I could speak again.

“And you?”

“Both of my parents are now free, living in Washington, DC, but my mother was still in her bonds when I was born, and so I must run.”

Free? Her mother must have gotten free after Anna was born. How awful. I was glad she could not see the sorrow on my face.

“That must be very hard, having your parents here and having to leave kith and kin all alone. How old are you, anyway, Miss Anna?”

“I am about 15 years old, Miss Willow, and you, Ma’am, are still straining to avoid my question almost as hard as Old Mary there is straining to get to that grass. Why don’t we stop for a moment in that copse of trees up there for a little respite, as the gentlemen say, to eat and talk a bit?”

Her knowledge of these woods astounded me. I had no notion at all of what grass or trees she had pointed to, as I myself could see nothing. The idea was certainly a welcome one, nervous though I was about what I had to tell. I had no idea how far advanced the night had become, but it felt late, and we were all tired and hungry.

“That is a welcome idea, Miss Anna.”

I leaned in the direction I wanted to go, laying the reins that way, but to my astonishment, Old Mary began to wander off in exactly the opposite direction.

“Pull the rein on the side you want her to go. She got confused because some people use neck-reining, and that was what it felt to her like you just did.”

I followed Anna’s directions, apologizing to Old Mary for my inexpert riding. She didn’t seem to take insult as quickly as our young guide, I was relieved to see. If we ever got out of this, and if I ever got to see Old Mary here, again, up North, I would feed her as many apples and carrots

as ever I could. Sugar would have to be a treat she'd forgo, as all of the cane I had heard of was grown and processed by plantations down Natchez way, and I was loathe to buy anything that I knew came from the stolen labor of those still held in bondage.

We settled in, leaving our horses saddled, but tethered close by and able to graze as we also took some small refreshment. We had packed water, corn bread, apples, part of which I saved for Old Mary, and a few carrots. We dared not risk a fire, but the short rest worked wonders for my tired and aching muscles, unaccustomed as I was to riding.

As it turned out, cold though it was, we were wise not to light any fire. We'd just gotten our mounts under the shelter of an old bush arbor, as Anna said the old folks used to call them. It seems that some of the field hands used to know how to bend young trees and saplings into the form of a shelter. After covering them with the bark of a certain tree, they could make a living hut, round and supple, and reasonably warm, too. I was surprised to learn how much this young one knew about living and moving about out of doors. Having been kept under constant watch in the house, I knew nothing of these things, and despaired of ever being able to learn them.

"Well, I think I will take this carrot over to Old Mary-"

"Hush!"

Anna was holding up her hand as she ducked low to the ground, sidling over to take the reins of both our mounts and pulling their heads low as well. I followed her lead, crouching down against the wall of our little shelter beside her. All was silence, to my untrained ear. Then I heard

the sound of voices on the trail, some ways distant from us. They were too far away to make out any words. I found a dread overtaking me that rooted me to the spot as if that tree had adopted me as one of it's own. Even after some minutes, when their voices had passed, born away on the pine breeze, I found myself unable to move. The pain in my belly was nearly overwhelming. I was barely aware of Anna telling me that all was well again. My breath, despite having opened my bodice before starting our ride, refused to move in or out of my lungs. My body remained caught in a paralysis against which I was helpless to act.

"It's ok, Miss Willow, it's ok. Just breathe. Come on, breathe with me."

I felt her beside me, stretching my body out, rolling me onto a blanket she must have laid on the floor of our little shelter over the pine needles. I felt the rhythm of her breathing, her chest somehow directly against mine. As the air returned to my lungs, I felt a soft pressure against my body, wrapping me in a warmth that made it feel as if it might be safe to be alive. The warmth spread all along my back, and then into my legs. I felt myself enveloped in a comforting cocoon that made me want to breathe and stretch. In my ear, a warm softness pressed in, uttering an unending command to keep breathing.

"That's right, just keep breathing with me. You're safe. We are safe."

I opened my eyes and saw that we were lying together wrapped in a blanket, Anna's arms around me in a protective embrace. I blushed, feeling a carnal sensation that made me ashamed of myself, especially after my previous cowardly paralysis. My face and neck felt damp and irritated.

“Ssshh, sshh, sshh, it’s alright.”

I realized, as I opened my eyes again, that I must have been crying. Anna’s smoothing of my hair, as a mother comforts her child, only made me feel more ashamed. I was a burden, nothing more, and would do a favor for all the world if I would only have the strength to end my worthless existence.

My weeping must have become even worse, for Anna began to hold my head and rock me back and forth, as one rocks a baby to sleep. And sleep I did, for a time. When next I opened my eyes, it seemed that the sun was just about to shine the bright rays of morning upon us. We still lay curled together, Anna’s hands tangled in my rebelliously curly long hair.

“Good morning, sleepyhead.”

How did she do that? I hadn’t moved an inch, except to open my eyes.

“How did you know -”

“That you were awake? Miss Willow, when you are on the road as long as I have been, you learn to notice things. How are you feeling?”

“Oh, much better, thank you. Just how long have you been on the road, Miss Anna?”

“Oh, since I was a young’un, I reckon.”

She smiled, a beautiful mischievous smile. She leaned over, stretching her body fully over mine, gently arching her back so as not to smother me, and reached out for the plate with our leftover apples and cornbread. I held her up at the waist, trying to be helpful as she held the plate even further out so that our horses could each take an apple. Feeling the curves of her body brought feelings back to my remembrance that made me blush again, as I also found my appetite return.

“Are you hungry?”

Her slender hand floated toward me, the tapered fingers balancing a piece of cornbread. I looked away, hoping that she had not noticed my blush.

“Oh, yes, thank you.”

I reached out to accept it.

“I’m afraid we don’t have any butter, and we’ll have to eat it cold.”

“Not to worry, Miss Anna, this morsel of food is like the manna sent from heaven.” *By your lovely hands.*

Her smile lit up my day as that pillar of fire must have lit the day of the wandering Israelites. We ate, arose, and packed our meager belongings, taking pains to be certain that our tiny shelter left no evidence to betray our presence.

As we prepared to leave, and she was helping me mount Old Mary, Anna looked me in the eye:

“That is why you didn’t want to tell me, isn’t it?”

How did she doggon do that? I could only nod my head. She had caught me. My weakness had again betrayed me.

“I don’t think you have that tree around here, do you?”

She looked at me so tenderly that I thought my heart must break. She touched my face, brushing aside a stray curl, which immediately rebounded into its former place.

“No, ma’am, we don’t have too many Weeping Willows up this way, not like further south.”

There we were. I no longer needed to explain. Relief flooded me, knowing that what became general knowledge before I could speak had, once again, spoken for itself.

"But let me tell you this: That particular breed of Willow is one of the strongest trees I know of. Those trees survive storm, rain, wind, giving shelter to all who pass by. They are useful, Miss Willow."

I must have given her a baleful look, for her eyes firmed up, as she pointed a finger at me.

"And so are you."

"Yes, Ma'am."

I nodded again, like a child, hoping she was right, but not truly believing it. I reached out, and she opened her hand, lacing her fingers through mine.

"Believe it."

How did she do that? There it was. She had that twinkle in her eye. I could have stayed like that forever, but Old Mary shifted her weight, reminding us that none of us were our own mistresses. We must hurry, if we were to remain out of chains.

She gently released my hand, patting Mary's broad neck as she glanced at my reins before ducking under the head of her own horse. She was mounted before I even noticed. She was practiced at this, I knew, but still I felt in awe of her dexterity. Both of mind and of body.

As we continued in the direction which, if I recalled my lessons correctly, was meant to be North by North West, I wondered how much longer we might be out here, at the mercy of any poor Marylander in need of our reward money.

For, rewards, on both our heads, there surely would be.

"I don't mean to pry, but I do wonder something," I turned my head, and saw that twinkle, again, "Will we be out here, I mean in these woods, for much longer?"

"No, Miss Willow," she'd answered with the softness of a fuzzy pod seed, "we will not."

She'd looked over at me, touching me with her eyes.

"Another day or so, at the outside. By then we should be in the town of Westminster, where we are to meet up with Dr. H."

I felt badly then, recalling how the panic of little Sal and my dear Miss Mary had spoiled our carefully laid plans for a quiet escape, forcing the retreat to our secondary, and less convenable,

escape plans. I could only hope and pray that things did not go too hard with Sal, Mary, and the others back there, who had been made to pay for my errors, the last time.

I could not bear to think on it.

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Chapter 6

We'd started on our way again, in spite of it being daylight. It was early morning, with the rising sun just as freshly awakened as we were. I was awake and worrying about our plan so as not to worry about little Sal and Miss Mary. Anna had agreed that there was no point in waiting, since we were only about a day's ride to our next station. Still, I fretted, though I tried not to let it show. I did not want my companion troubled by my inconstant humors. That turned out to be a good thing, it would seem.

"Stop!"

Her urgent whisper had sent pins and needles from my belly up through my arms.

"Get your head down, quick!"

Anna had grabbed the reins out of my hands and led the way over to a large fallen tree before I even knew she was beside me. Our horses must have been well trained, for they followed her tightly together with their heads down, so that I could hardly move at all. I flattened my body along Old Mary's neck, feeling as if I might fall off any moment. Then Anna did a thing I had never even heard of.

“Just hold right on, and be still, like a rock.”

She clucked her tongue and patted both horses heads. To my utter amazement, we four, like the Children of Israel, fell to the ground as one man. What was more, we did so in complete silence. The sounds of a few birds, preparing for the long winter ahead, and a light breeze rustling the fallen leaves of a few trees also preparing to brave the coming cold, were all that my untrained ears could tell me. I started to raise my head to look around, but felt the lightest touch of Anna’s hand upon my arm, warning me not to move. Then I heard them.

Voices, moving through the woods, only just coming within my hearing. Yet my sweet Anna had heard them well before, and had acted with steadier nerve than many a man would have done. How did she do that?

Then came another sound which I heard at a distance, but well enough to bring the taste of bile to my throat.

A dog had barked.

I began to pray, as the smell of my own sweat hit me, mingled with the smell of horse and pine needles. My face was buried between the necks of our two horses, who had somehow managed to lay themselves down with us still mounted upon them. Not if I lived a hundred years and finally got to see a circus perform did I ever expect to see something like that again. I gave thanks for this minor miracle, and asked the Almighty for the grace to let us remain unseen and

unheard by those who sought our return to bondage. I also prayed for forgiveness. I would need it, if I got to my sewing basket before those patrollers got to me.

"Stay here, and don't move."

What was she up to, now? I felt Anna move, silent as the grave, from off of her horse, gliding low across the ground over to a large bush that might have had some berries on it, a few weeks ago, and scatter something, then glide back to our hiding place, almost in the blink of an eye, despite the distance she had covered. The dog barked again, closer this time, and I heard shouts, as if several men were following.

As the racket grew louder, Anna looked both ways, as if about to cross a street in the Federal City, then whispered:

"Hold on tight, Old Mary won't let you fall."

Before I had time to ponder those words, she had clucked her tongue and patted both horses heads again. I felt both of our mounts surging up into the air, and wrapped my fingers in Old Mary's mane as my feet found the stirrups. With another click of her tongue, we both began to walk backwards! My stomach roiled as the shouts and barking grew closer, and we were finally able to see our pursuers. They were indeed slave patrollers, and most likely looking specifically for us.

Then, I saw another sight which I shall never forget. A black bear, which I had somehow utterly failed to notice, was sniffing at the bush Anna had just left. As the shouts became orders to stop, directed at us, and the barking became the baying of a hound which has cornered its quarry, the bear looked at them, and stood up:

Growling.

As if this were exactly what Anna had been waiting for, she gave a sharp whistle, and the ears of both our mounts perked up to points.

“Hold on!”

Anna spurred her horse, and jerked to the left.

All I’d had time for was a glance her way, as Old Mary surged forward, in time with her companion, wheeling around so sharply that I only just managed to stay seated. I heard the sounds of a dog crying out in pain, a bear growling at the sky, and a gun shot.

I leaned over Old Mary’s neck, flattening out with her as she and our friends beside us stretched their necks. I clung to good Old Mary’s mane for dear life, my legs wrapped around her flanks as my fingers clutched the hair of her mane, my face nearly buried in that hair whipping around mingled with mine. Over the noise of our hooves, I could hear the commotion behind us.

It sounded closer.

In my fear of the slave hunters, I had forgotten my fear of riding.

That was a grave error.

“Shoot ‘im again! Shoot ‘im!!”

As I looked back I could just make out that bear, its terrible face lifted to the sky. Then my grip on Old Mary’s mane slipped a little. I let go with my right hand, reaching down as I turned my head back, feeling for the reins. More shots rang out, and I flinched, losing the right rein I had just retrieved. I was barely managing to keep my seat, stretched over the pommel as I was.

Then I saw the log.

When I awoke, it seemed like days must have passed. Night had fallen, cold and still. The smell of pine needles and earth was mingled with a foul under-taste. Blood. I lifted my head a little, and saw lightning bugs appear just above my eyes. Wait, that couldn’t be right. It was too cold now, for lightening bugs. I tried to get up, and immediately regretted it. My aching body protested, the slightest movement producing a jolt of pain that yanked a whimper from my lips. As if in reply to that pained prayer, a sound like somebody sweeping dirt under the carpet came from beside me.

Try as I might, though, I could not make my body turn over to see the source of that sound. I sighed in despair. Even that hurt.

Dear Lord, please let me go.

It was the only prayer I could make. But it was not the good Lord who answered me. Instead, I felt a familiar muzzle nudging my shoulder, just as a strange sounding bird made a double cry. I felt a shuffling against my left arm, and then the fall of four hooves stepping over me just as gently as could be, touching the ground inches away from my chilled limbs. That muzzle lowered itself back to my head, breathing into my face as I'd gotten used to Old Mary doing.

Old Mary!

That strange bird called again, closer this time, and I began to worry, alone out here in these woods. I had tried once to be still like a rock, and look at me. Instead of being like a rock, I appeared to have hit my head on one. Not exactly walking by faith. Even worse, I'd gotten Old Mary here into danger along with me. Anna would not be happy with me. But right now, that was the least of my troubles, for she was not here. In point of fact, I didn't even know where *here* might be. My dear guide Anna could navigate these woods in surety, while I could not.

And now, we'd gone and gotten separated.

I heard that strange bird make it's call again, closer still, which augured nothing good. If this was to be my end, I wanted to at least let Old Mary here get away. I tried to lift my head, and got kicked by more lightening bugs for my trouble. Never knew those bugs could kick anything, but they sure did. I tried to puff out a breath. No. That only made her come closer. I began to feel myself tremble, and even thought I smelled the stench of fear that could only come from my body. Horse sweat smelled sweeter and pure. That smell was so close I could see myself rolling up onto Old Mary's back, my leg levitating over the saddle as if by some art of magic. The pain that exploded through my body as my head came up was no magic. Try though I did to stay quiet, a croak escaped my throat.

"Hush, now."

I was sure I'd finally gone mad. I imagined I had heard the voice of my dear sweet Anna, whom I feverishly hoped was far away, safe from these dangers. Feeling a gentle touch upon my neck, I tried opening my eyes again, and beheld four familiar windows into the soul of the one I most feared to see: Anna was indeed there beside me, rolling me onto Old Mary, who had apparently once again done her circus trick of laying her large frame right down on the ground. This blessed creature had practically wormed herself under my body, somehow. Kneeling right beside her, in double beauty, were two images of my Anna. My dear, sweet, wonderful, and now also in danger, Anna. I tried to warn her about that strange bird, but my mouth only admitted a grimace, and then the lightening bugs had their say, forcing my eyes closed again in a nauseated haze. I felt a finger upon my lips as the earth seemed to pull my limbs down, and then, forgive me, the pain and smells all faded away again.

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Chapter 7

The smell of grits pulled me out of the dark place to which I had been dragged by the lightening bugs. It was a welcome change from that odor of fear in which I had last bathed. As I opened my eyes, half expecting to see Old Mary's muzzle, instead, I saw only a band of white. It was evident that I lay upon a bed, softness all around me. I gave a start, that terrible notion of being back in Virginia taking hold for an instant.

"She's awake! Doctor!"

That was Anna's voice! My sweet, courageous Anna! Then, what I had seen was no fevered illusion. It had been her, in the flesh, if only one of her. She had indeed come back for me. I nearly cried with gratitude to the Lord above. She was safe. I was safe. Even Old Mary, whom my torpid limbs had endangered, was safe. And warm! It was so blessedly warm here.

Where was here, as a matter of fact? I turned my head gingerly toward the source of those dulcet tones, wary of the pain I'd felt the last time I'd tried to move. Now, I felt no pain at all. I did feel the softest touch, though, upon my face. The warmth of those fingers was as the kiss of the sun on a cold winter's morn. I tried to reach up, but my arm felt like lead.

"Don't try to move, honey child."

That whisper into my ear fed me more than any manna from heaven. I felt my whole body relax, letting go of the fear and tension of the past days. But why were my eyes covered?

"I can't see you."

I felt another hand take hold of mine, caressing it tenderly as one would comfort a wounded house cat.

"Shh, shh. Don't you worry."

How could I worry? I was too happy to be here, with her by my side. She must have intuited my thoughts, for she gave my hand a gentle squeeze, before continuing.

"Your head is bandaged all the way around, to protect you from moving too much. You took a right good fall from Old Mary."

My happiness turned instantly to sorrow. I felt ashamed of my clumsiness, having again thrown our plans into disarray. My mouth must have turned down, because Anna recognized my shame right away.

"No, no, don't you *even*."

My hand got a slightly sharper squeeze, now. Not painful at all, but enough to know that she felt I was thinking nonsense.

"That fall was all my fault."

Her fault? But I was the one who'd fallen off of the horse!

She took both of my hands by those long tapered fingers, shifting to sit up, as nearly as I could tell, directly in front of my propped up head.

"Now look, Miss Willow."

That formal tone got my attention.

"I knew that you had never sat such a saddle before in your life, so it was my responsibility to keep you from falling. I failed. Had Old Mary not obeyed my calls, we might still be out there looking for you."

Her calls? What calls? Did she mean to say that the cry of that strange bird had been her, all along? I set my head slowly to one side, pondering the possibility until a mild ache reminded me not to move. She must have taken my meaning, for she burst into a laugh so sudden that she let go of both of my hands.

“You mean -do you mean to tell me that you thought my calls to Old Mary were some animal out there in the woods? Is that what you were trying to say that made you pass out when I found you?”

I closed my mouth, only just having realized that it was hanging open. What a fool I was.

“Oh, my dear Willow, I forget how little of the outside world you have seen, trapped in that big old house. I am sorry, I do not mean to laugh, it’s just that I never even thought of it!”

Of course, I finally understood. No bird in the woods could be dangerous. Just like the lightening bugs. I’d been delirious. I hung my head just a little. Then I felt warm arms around my shoulders, gently hugging me.

“Well, now, you are not to worry. We’ve arrived safely at our station, and can rest here a few days before going on. You need time to mend.”

She paused, and I felt the bed lighten, as she must have stood up.

“Doctor H. here is going to have a look at your head. Don’t be afraid.”

I felt her pat my hand, before placing my arm at my side. Then the bed tilted again, as a heavier weight sat beside me. A smell of rose water told me that this man was a gentleman of standing.

"Hello, Willow. Welcome to my home. I am the Conductor in this town. My wife is preparing some breakfast, if you can hold a bit of food down, but first I must see to your head."

He spoke like a white man accustomed to authority, but kind in it's use. His accent was from Maryland, but if Anna trusted him, then so would I. I opened my mouth to thank him, but he quickly cut me off.

"No, no, don't try to speak. You have a serious concussion, and need to save your strength."

I felt the bandages unwinding, my head feeling more light, as if a pressure were lifting away. While the ache grew a bit sharper, the growling of my stomach was beginning to compete quite successfully. After re-wrapping my head, the doctor pronounced me in good recovery, and withdrew from the room, if the sound of his retreating footsteps and the soft click of a door was any judge.

I felt Anna sit back down on the bed beside me and take up my hand.

"I can hear your stomach rumbling, so that makes two of us."

I smiled, hearing the mischief in her voice.

"Dr. H. and his wife are good white folks. We can rest here, for a while."

I recalled dimly that Dr. H. had been meant to meet us with a carriage out there, in the woods. From there, '*Joe*' was to have driven us along the road into town. But that was before we met with the bear, and the patrollers. I felt a pity for the poor beast, and a guilty gratitude, as well. Had it not been for that terrible sacrifice, we might now be staying in a slave gaol, rather than this warm refuge. My stomach rumbled again, reminding me that I needed to sit up a bit more to eat. Just then, the door opened again, and a smell hit me that I had never in my life expected to enjoy.

Bacon!

Anna helped me sit up, and then pushed the bandages a bit higher on my forehead. The doctor had left my eyes mostly uncovered when he renewed my head dressing, but the bandages still covered my eyes a bit. It was as if he'd wanted to cover them again, but opted to allow me enough vision to feel safer in my new surroundings. I was glad of it, for I was quite curious to see who was coming through the door, now.

"Here you are, dears."

The woman serving us was White, and seemed as pleased to be bringing us our breakfast as if we had been, too. My eyes finally allowed me to confirm what my nose and stomach had already told me.

There was indeed bacon. On both our plates!

All my life I had been denied the pleasure of eating bacon. That torturous smell haunted me, for I was never allowed to eat any. The Senator, displeased with my refusal to feign happiness with him, had ordered the kitchen staff to cook bacon for breakfast every day, but never to allow me to have any. Thus, I was always treated to the sight of others enjoying this luxury, but never indulged, myself. Today, it seemed, that was to change.

She handed us our plates, patting my hand in a motherly fashion as she guided the trembling hand holding my plate into my lap. Our cutlery was bundled in white linen napkins, not monogrammed, I was surprised to see. She held up a perfectly soft hand, as I made to thank her for her kindness. She must have had some household help, but they were no where to be seen, or heard, rather.

“You must save your strength, young Willow, and recover. You are safe here.”

She had a very mild Northern accent, from which state, I could not tell. It seemed she had lived here long enough to learn to hide her true origin, or to forget, as I had. As she turned to go, I sent a look to Anna, wondering if she would catch my meaning. She did.

“Mrs. H. Will you stay, if you please?”

The doctor’s wife turned back toward us, looking at me for just a moment, before nodding graciously. Then she smiled.

“Call me Adeleide.” She lifted her head for a moment, “I shall have to go downstairs to bring up my own breakfast, but yes, I will stay with you awhile, if you both like.”

I tried to give her an appreciative smile, as I took in the shock. She acknowledged me with another nod, before turning to go back down to the kitchens, leaving the door open, this time. There must indeed have been no servants about, this day. I hoped we were not too much of a burden on this kind woman. She was evidently not accustomed to rough work, and with no burns or callouses, not even to cooking, I imagined. What trouble must we be for these good people, and danger of a much worse fate, if caught helping us, to boot. The very idea that she would eat with us was as foreign to me as being served by her. And yet, here, it seemed, this wonder was about to come to pass.

A light tread upon the stairs announced the return of Miss Adeleide, the same tray now carrying her plate and cutlery, wrapped in the same sort of napkin as ours had been. But her plate was lacking something.

She had no bacon.

“Oh!”

A thought had startled me so that I failed to hide my chagrin. As both Anna and the doctor’s wife looked at me expecting some malady, I blushed to the very tips of my toes, my face burning with shame.

“I’m so terribly sorry, M-”

Again, she held up her hand, sharply, this time. I knew, I was to save my strength, and I also felt that she must have some similar horror of what I might have been about to call her. Being raised up North, as I supposed she’d been, our ways of addressing one another must have been a cause of consternation for her. For me, however, there was a greater cause, still. This woman, it seemed, had sacrificed her own meal for us. There was a slice of bacon each, upon our plates, yet only grits and an egg upon hers. I felt that, for the first time, I must have taken the food out of another woman’s mouth. It was a thought that turned my stomach. Bad enough that the poor animal who provided us with this food must be sacrificed for our needs.

“What’s the matter, Honey?”

Anna was right at my side, her hand against my face as if to check my temperature. I looked down at my plate, toward the bacon, and she again seemed to understand in an instant. How did she do that?

“If you don’t think that this bacon will sit well in your stomach, I might have to say the same for myself. Mrs., Miss Adeleide, we’ve not been used to eating such rich fare, neither of us. We may both do well to forgo this kindness, much as we appreciate it, Ma’am.”

I saw a steady look pass between them, one I had never imagined could pass between a Negress and a White woman. The doctor’s wife nodded once again. Then she leaned over from the chair where she had sat while Anna came to me, taking the slice from my plate, and adding it to hers.

To Anna, though, she looked, almost sternly, intoning, “Now Anna, sorry, *Joe*. You are a driver, and need more meat to keep up your strength, especially in this cold. You should try to eat this bacon, and let me know how you feel, then, alright?”

I had the feeling that this woman would be quite at home giving lessons to unruly school boys. Anna actually lowered her head a bit, as if abashed.

“Yes M-”

“And no more of this Missus business, if you please, young *Joe*.”

Then she smiled, and sat back in her chair, taking up her fork and stirring the melted butter into her grits before nodding encouragingly at each of us, in an invitation to join her in the meal. I

was surprised again, having half expected to say grace before eating, but decided that it might be impolite to do so. Instead, I picked up my fork and edged it into my own grits.

They were a bit chewy, but not bad for northern cooking. As the other women ate their bacon, I relaxed, enjoying my grits as if for the first time in my life. No longer was the lack of bacon a torment. Now, it was a gift. I'd been able, for once, to treat another person to a luxury, and it felt as if, in that moment, the world was indeed a better place to live.

At least for a while.

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Chapter 8

During the time that we stayed in that place of respite, we always took our meals up in our room. It had a small window very high up, and thus seemed safe enough from curious glances. Though I gained steadily in strength each day, all the household, it seemed, hung on tender-hooks for my recovery. We ate simple fare, whether due to my delicate condition, or to Miss Adeleide's lack of kitchen help, I did not know. But we ate often, and the food was filling. We knew we would need it for the journey ahead.

One morning, the doctor knocked on our door. This was unusual, now that my head injury no longer needed such precise looking after. Anna normally performed this service for me, several times per day. I wasn't sure it was always strictly necessary, but I enjoyed the closeness of her attentions. As she opened the door, the smell of an apple pie wafted in with Dr. H. He looked a bit nervous, as did the young dark-skinned girl behind him. Who was she?

He was holding some papers, which he looked at so long that I thought they must burst into flame. At last, he cleared his throat.

"I am sorry to impose a change of plans on all of us, but I have found myself presented with a situation for which I had not been entirely prepared."

He glanced down at the child, who lowered her head even further, as if attempting to make herself invisible. Just at that moment, the doctor's wife appeared in the doorway, stepping in and bending down to take the girl into her arms in one graceful movement.

"Don't be afraid, Tilly. None of this is your fault. You are a very good and brave little girl."

Adeleide's whisper had somehow managed to carry all the way across the room, filling each of us, it seemed, with a dread that grew heavier with every passing moment. The doctor broke the silence by holding up the sheaf of papers in his hand.

"Poor Tilly, here, has come to us with a Porter from another town. Unbeknownst to him, our house was not empty, as it was scheduled to be." The doctor looked down, as if ashamed. "He brought her here from a Departure that did not go as planned elsewhere. I cannot tell you more, of course, but I could not bear to turn her away. I hope that you can make do with this situation until we find a way to resolve it."

I looked at little Tilly, seeing how small she was, like my dear Little Sal. Before the tears could come to my eyes, I beckoned for the child, who came cautiously toward me, as if approaching a hot frying pan. I held out my hand, waiting for her to reach out, and found Anna there beside me holding both of our hands together. She was looking from me to this child as if the oddest notion had just occurred to her. I wondered what new mischief that agile mind of hers was cooking up.

"Doctor, what are those papers you've got there?"

He looked relieved to finally have an question to answer.

"These are your Free Papers, *Joe*, and your Hack License to drive up to Philadelphia. This was to have been a simpler affair, but now we have had to improvise, as Mr. D. is no longer available for you to drive him up there."

I looked at Anna. Would she, or could she, explain who this was? So much of this affair was shrouded in deliberate mystery. I hoped to hear at least some of it brought to light.

Anna looked back at me, shaking her head ever so slightly. Now was not the time for questions. Apparently the state of things was more delicate than I had surmised.

"Well, no decisions should be made on an empty stomach. Young Tilly has helped me to prepare dinner, and there is to be pie afterward. Then, and not a moment before, we will find some manner of resolving this situation."

The doctor's wife had spoken, and not an objection was there to be heard. The doctor placed the sheaf of papers upon the writing desk by the bedside, nodded at both of us, and left the room, his wife having already gone down to see to dinner. The smell of pie was now being joined by that of what seemed to be a collection of roasted vegetable smells, as though it were Sunday after church.

The three of us shared a basin to wash up and dress for dinner, only just sitting in a row on the bed by the time the doctor's wife arrived carrying a larger tray than usual. Anna and Tilly helped her arrange our place settings, while I made sure that all remained in equilibrium, seated as we were upon the bedside.

"I must return and dine downstairs with my husband, in case any curious neighbors look in, but I shall come back up shortly to collect the dishes. I do wish you all a good meal."

We each nodded our thanks, and she gave a gracious nod in return before closing the door behind her. I looked at Anna, nodding toward little Tilly's plate. Anna turned to the child, encouraging her to eat, but the little girl shook her head.

"Grace."

By all the heavens. *At last!* I was overjoyed to finally be able to say grace without seeming to be a troublesome patient. Anna smiled, and all three of us bowed our heads. Tilly looked up at me, and I decided to give some small thanks to the good Lord for getting us here safely. Then, our hearts more at ease, we ate with less worry. It was still plain that each of us feared this new development, but things suddenly seemed just a little bit better.

After clearing about half her plate, seeming to be absorbed in her thoughts as she ate, Anna looked up at me.

“Miss Willow?”

“Yes, Miss Anna?”

“How do you feel about your reading, now?”

My heart sank. I had been sure that this question would come soon, and equally sure that I would not be up to the challenge which the question was meant to represent.

During the time I spent convalescing at the home of Dr. H., we had not been not idle. The doctor’s wife had spent every spare moment, it seemed, showing me a new eye chart, with diverse characters of the alphabet.

This served two purposes. First, in checking my vision after each meal, we could all see the progress of my recovery. Second, and most urgently, Anna and I were learning our letters. We would need to know how to read if we were to make sure our escape, for many papers and postings made mention of our evasion, and according to a certain Mr. Bacon, knowledge was power.

Little had we known just how soon the need for such power would arrive.

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Chapter 9

Not long after beginning our lessons, Miss Adeleide had noted a peculiarity about me. While Anna was quick to learn her letters and put them together as sounds, spelling out her name and mine, I was not. One evening, wishing to hear the story of Moses leading the Children of Israel through the Red Sea, I had asked Adeleide, as she often reminded me to call her, whether she would read it to us. She did so with excellent cheer, pointing to each word as she spoke it. Not long into our reading, she was suddenly called away, and had handed me the Good Book to continue looking at it. It was wondrous in my eyes, having always been forbidden the liberty of seeing any books, and having been closely watched for any signs of excessive curiosity. Even my embroidery was forbidden to use any lettering. The samplers I had been told of in the homes of white women were forbidden to my eyes, and thus I had to make due with flower and other designs taught to me by Miss Mary. That evening, I had eagerly grasped the chance to devour these words.

The memory of sitting there, free to drink in both the words before me and the scent of my dear Anna, brought the first joy I had ever felt.

“Shall we see what we can read now, Miss Anna?”

I’d lowered my head just a tad, and favored her with my best coquettish regard, batting my eyelids twice for effect. It had worked.

“Are you inviting me to try reading from the Song of Songs, Miss Willow?”

She'd moved closer to me on the bed, her warmth spreading over me like the softest of comforters. I blushed now to remember how I had quite nearly forgotten myself.

"Well, I do not know how we are to find the right place in this enormous Book, but I…"

She had taken my hand in hers. I had then found myself lost for words, gazing at her lips, feeling the smooth paper in one hand, and the taper of her fingers in the other.

"Let us start at the Beginning, then, my dearest Willow."

All I could do was nod.

Anna and I had made a game of it, seeing which words we could puzzle out for ourselves. Imagine our surprise upon finding that looking back at the words to which Adeleide had pointed, I could recall each of them perfectly, even in other places in the Good Book. Now, that strange ability, it seemed, might come to some good use.

"Miss Adeleide, you must put our dear Willow here to the test, if you please."

Anna's voice shook me from my reverie, as I realized that the good doctor's wife was standing in our room, somehow having managed to escape my notice. This was very odd, for I

never missed the sounds, however slight, of a person approaching my doorway. I took it as a sign that I must be coming to feel safer in this place. Sadly, I knew that we couldn't stay much longer. Each day that we passed here put us all in greater danger.

"Why of course, young *Joe*. What did you have in mind?"

The doctor and his wife were always calling her Joe, now that little Tilly was here. Perhaps preparing for the roles we must play upon departing this station.

"Well, Ma'am, I have an inkling of an idea, but I believe that it hinges upon Miss Willow here being able to use her particular talent to recognize certain words where ever they might appear."

We both looked at her with questions in our eyes. Little Tilly simply smiled. What did this young child know that we did not?

Anna looked at us, her mischievous smile mirroring that of little Tilly. They looked at each other, and Anna gave a slight nod. I was sure there had been a wink of her eye in there, too, although her head was turned away from me.

Little Tilly skipped over to the writing desk, withdrawing a particularly small but official seeming document with great care. Then, turning to face me, she folded her body into the most

graceful curtsy I had ever seen from a child so young. I glanced in confusion at Anna, who merely lifted an eyebrow at me. Tilly arose from her curtsy and carried the paper to me, holding it out with her head bowed, as if I were…

"No, oh, no, Tilly. Anna -"

I shook my head as my eyes began to fill with tears. I would not play the role of those from whom we had so lately escaped.

"Yes, Miss Willow, it must be this way. And you must conform."

The steady look Anna placed upon me was almost stern.

Poor Miss Adeleide looked quite bewildered.

"I cannot do it."

"You can, Miss Willow, and for all of our sake, you must succeed."

Anna crossed the few steps separating us, which had suddenly begun to seem like a great chasm. She took my hand in both of hers, those hazel eyes looking directly into mine.

“Willow,” she whispered, “this is our best chance to get away safely, all three of us. Free.”

I’d begun to tremble so violently that I could hardly speak. This was apparently what Anna had been expecting, for she nodded once again to Tilly, who turned, now facing Miss Adeleide, and held out the paper to her. Adeleide patted the tiny hand as she took the paper and glanced at it, before looking back up.

Tilly held her hand out for the paper again, which Mrs. H. relinquished. Again, that demure approach, deep curtsy, and the paper held up to me, with her head bowed. Anna squeezed my hand, nodding toward Tilly. I felt like a small child being encouraged to eat. I reached out for the paper, hefting its weight as if it were my sewing scissors. I looked at it, waiting for the marks on the paper to resolve themselves into words.

None did.

I looked up at Anna in despair, but she merely nodded again, this time winking her eye, at me! What was going on, here?

I looked back at the paper, knowing that I had missed something. It became our old game once again, as I sought for words that Miss Adeleide had shown us, now not on the printed page, but on a handwritten paper. She had been schooling us in reading her handwritten copy of that passage through the Sea which I loved so, and we grew to love her, for that great labor.

“My hand” was the first phrase I was able to make out.

I jumped slightly, as Adeleide nodded her approval. She had drawn very near, reading the paper over my shoulder as I worked to puzzle out the handwritten words.

Anna nodded at me again, encouraging my return to our reading game. This challenge was far greater, but I now understood how great would be our reward. I must not fail.

“Servant!”

I looked up in time to see a rapid look pass between the two women, no longer shocking me by it’s equality. I was now too bound up in the task at hand. The final word on the paper sprang out at me, setting my teeth on edge as it came clear. The one word I would know without ever needing to be taught. My throat caught as I read out the name of that odious Dominion.

“Virginia.”

Just as I cleared my throat of that last word, Miss Adeleide tilted her head, as if waiting to speak. She’d not had a moment since entering the room to make known the reason for her presence. We had just dined, and she normally busied herself downstairs at this time. She wore an expression of worry upon her face that augured nothing good.

“That is an excellent reading, Willow, in so short a time of study.”

Her words were kind, but her voice was uncertain. She looked at Anna with expectancy. Anna merely smiled, and nodded again toward Tilly. The child inched closer to me, looked up with a wicked grin, and proclaimed:

“I am to be your Body Servant, Miss Willow.”

“Certainly not!”

The doctor’s wife finally understood.

“It is the best, indeed the only, way for us to proceed, Miss Adeleide.” Anna lifted her head, her eyes level with those of the doctor’s wife.

My mouth must surely have fallen open, for never had I seen a Negro, slave or free, openly contradict a White person! As the two women looked sternly at one another, the doctor strode into the room.

“I fear Anna is correct, my Dear. It must be so, for they must leave us. Tonight.”

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Chapter 10

I began to tremble, that old stench returning. As I looked about the room, I saw not the faces of my sweet Anna, nor the doctor and his wife, but that of little Tilly: in chains.

We were back in the Slave Gaol where my friends had been punished. The odors of sweat mingled with blood, dirt, and fear, as the Senator ordered me held and made to watch. Each slice of that leather whistling through the air brought fresh emissions of noxious gasses, the air befouled with the contents of their bowels, and mine. The blood of both friends, whipped one after the other, smeared my face so thickly that my tears ran puddles of blood to the slop covered floor. My shrieks for mercy joined those of Little Sal, bound beside me, to watch, and to learn.

No mercy came, only more blood. The smell of iron rose up so sharply that I could taste the rust. Then, the Senator drew near with a smile that turned my stomach.

“You shall have a double length bath, now, before I come to see you, My Ann.”

He’d nodded to his head overseer, turning on his heel to leave as I had begun to wretch.

A touch upon my cheek, tender as that of a Great Grandmother, brought me back to the room. The velvet hand of Little Tilly was warm as she stretched up to hold my face, like dear Anna had done so many times before.

“Miss Willow.”

That whisper broke through the tears racing down my face. I bent down to pick her up, and she touched her tiny face to my ear.

“Be strong, and of good courage, for the Lord is with us.”

As I marveled at the wisdom of this young child, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. Anna had given Tilly the slightest of nods. I turned to her, little Tilly still in my arms, and raised an eyebrow.

She rewarded me with her most mischievous smile. So, then. Not only from the mouths of babes. My tears ended, I couldn’t help but return her smile. My breast filled with hope, until stayed by my bodice.

“You see, my dear Miss Willow, we can indeed accomplish this task which is set before us.”

Anna’s confidence was as bracing as a cup of tea on a cold day. Tilly seconded that thought, nodding her head so vigorously that I had to put her down. Anna drew near, pulling us both into an embrace that no family had ever bested.

“Well, my dears.”

I looked up with a start. It was Mrs. H. She stood in the doorway holding a bundle of clothing. The doctor, however, was no longer in the room. Just how long, exactly, had I been unawares? Had I fainted?

“While the doctor is seeing to the carriage, I have brought you such apparel as our *Joe Wright* here has requested.” She nodded to Anna, then turned to me. “We always have diverse disguises on hand that will do for young *Joe* and Tilly, but nothing for this Peculiar ruse of yours. I only keep one change of fine dress and stays, Willow, for special occasions.”

That word. *Does she disapprove?* Tilly ran over to take the bundle from her. Miss Adeleida continued across the room, stopping before a large chest. When she opened it, a scent of lavender escaped, perfuming the room. She pulled out a dress such as the mistress of a plantation would wear. I gasped, finally understanding the extent of her hospitality. Just then, a familiar sound caught my ear, somewhere outside. I looked to the window, but all was darkness, and quiet.

“Did you hear me, Willow?”

I looked back, embarrassed to have missed what she was saying. Little Tilly, already beginning to play her role, responded for me.

“If you please, Missus, my mistress is very devout, and was saying a prayer just as you spoke.”

She bowed her head and dropped into that perfect curtsy as she finished, drawing a scowl from Miss Adeleide. I almost thought I heard the child let escape half of a giggle.

“Willow, I fear that this dress will go a little long on you, but we’ve no time to alter it.”

That dress, I knew, would not suffice on special occasions in Virginia. But for travel, it would do.

“Mrs. H. this is the loveli-”

“You need not flatter me, young Willow. I am no Virginia Lady. Let us be about our task quickly, for I hear them in the courtyard.”

We had tiptoed down the back stairs as quickly as we dared. While Adeleide, as she had again reminded me to call her, was pinning me inside of her best dress, still smelling of lavender, Anna and Tilly had packed our precious documents. That I had passed Anna’s test seemed nothing short of a miracle, now that we must speed away so suddenly. I cursed my capricious memory, as capable of holding me in an iron grip while the smell of blood washed over me as it was of delivering those words which would safeguard our freedom.

The carriage stood waiting in the courtyard, the door open and barely visible in the darkness. The doctor himself held the reins of the two horses while little Tilly hid nearly under my skirts as our *Joe* ushered us in, closing the door behind her. She handed me the sheaf of documents, neatly bound in a leather pouch. My heart raced as I began to taste bile. Now I became grateful for that lavender perfuming our cramped space.

All had passed so quickly and in such silence that I'd not had time to consider the consequences, should I fail. I felt my gloved fingers begin to sweat where they made contact with the leather. Wonderful little Tilly came to my rescue yet again, holding up my satchel to store away our papers. I settled in to the seat, brooding even as I tucked away the satchel next to me. Still lost in my thoughts, Anna leaned into my shoulder, whispering in my ear.

"We have saddle bags, if you wish to keep your old sewing basket."

I nearly dropped the satchel. I clutched it to my bosom after catching it just as my hands let it slip.

"I thought that might bring you back to us. I saved it, after you left it in the wagon, in case you should need anything, except those scissors, of course."

Her smile, even in the darkness of that carriage, carried to me. I could barely see her, but I could hear that devilish grin in her voice, and the lifted brow. I began to relax, breathing as deeply

as my bodice would allow while the lavender worked its soothing balm upon me. I was glad that Adeleide's dress was too large for me, as it gave me more room to breathe. How fortunate we were to have sheltered in the home of gentry, accustomed to changing various times even on a normal day. No working family, colored or white, would have had the means to accomplish this ruse. Then a problem occurred to me.

I turned to whisper: "But Anna, I'm sorry, *Joe*. How is it that you found my basket? I thought I had dropped it along the way when I fell from Old Mary."

"Oh, no. I put it in my saddle bag when you first mounted her."

"But then…"

"The bulge in your saddle bag? Only an extra blanket."

Her voice had risen an octave at those last words. What a marvelous singing voice she must have, if I ever got a chance to hear it. We were not allowed to sing whilst in the doctor's home, lest the neighbors hear. Thinking of Doctor H., I wondered how he would explain this outing. He must have invented a patient to see as a pretext. I could only suppose, as we were not to know any more than strictly essential for our flight.

Which reminded me:

“I hope Old Mary is happy, where ever she is. I was truly sorry to have put her, and all of you, in danger.”

“Hush, now. We have spoken about this. Besides, you’ll see her again, soon.”

I turned to look at her, but she had turned her back to mine, as if to go to sleep. Little Tilly took that moment to stretch out on the opposite seat, and all was silence. The rest of my questions would just have to wait.

Our ride in the carriage, that night, seated back to back as Anna and I were, was at least sure against the winter chill. I’d laid an extra blanket over little Tilly, then snuggled back up against Anna. At some point during our ride, she had turned to cradle me in her arms as we slept. I awoke nuzzling the inside of her neck, and rose with a start, as I saw our Tilly observing me. My cheeks began to burn as I wondered how long she might have been awake.

“It’s ok, Miss Willow. Your servant Joe Wright is here to keep us safe, Missus.”

I was so relieved, I hardly knew what to say.

“Oh, Tilly, you don’t need to play our game here. We are alone.”

She shook her head most insistently:

"*Joe* told me that we are never to end this game, Miss Willow, until we are free up North. All the way North."

She looked at the window, covered against the cold, and against prying eyes, and inched closer, whispering, "we never know what ears may be up against this door."

"That is right."

How long had Anna been awake? I'd not felt her move a muscle, but she was surely listening. How did she do that? Just then, I recalled the question which had been burning within me as we went to sleep.

"Miss, sorry, *Joe*, you said something last night about seeing Old Mary soon. What on this Good Lord's earth were you talking about, pray tell?"

Anna flashed her most devilish grin. It was the one that promised shocking things to come.

"What say both of you," she had managed to lower her voice another octave, to sound like a young boy, if not a man, "to a spot of breakfast, before I answer that question?"

"I am starving!"

I was amazed at how quietly this child could shout.

"Tilly," I teased in my finest soprano whisper, which is not an easy thing to do, "you are always starving, Honey Child!"

We all fell to giggling as quietly as we had whispered, as we shared out the cornbread Mrs. H. had given us to breakfast upon. Even cold, that aroma was enticing. It had been all she'd had to hand, so we knew we must make do on that one meal for most of this day.

When we had each had three chews and a swallow of our meal, I looked up again at Anna, my head tilted insistently at her, as I waited for my reply.

She finally rewarded me: "Do you remember the white men who met us where we stopped with the wagon?"

I nodded.

"They were expecting to see four of us, of course."

Of course. I still recalled the despair of that parting.

“Old Mary was meant to carry you and Little Sally, while Captain here,” she lifted her head up toward the front of the carriage, “is sturdy enough for both Miss Mary and myself. Since it was just you, they almost took Old Mary back with them, but I told them that two horses were better than one. That is why she is here again, tied up back as the spare.“

Old Mary was here! It was a pity that I had no apples or carrots for her. That thought brought to mind the memory of my Miss Mary, for some odd reason, singing one of our favorite songs. I wished I could go now, down to some peaceful river, thinking about a good way, a better way than this world’s way, to pray.

There came a knock at the carriage door, and I realized that we had not been moving for some moments. I wondered how I had managed not to notice. All was silent. Another knock came, this time in three sharp raps, followed by two light knocks. Anna nodded, and Little Tilly cracked the door open just enough to see the pair of blue eyes looking back at us, and opened it wide enough for the doctor see in.

“Joe, it is here that I must leave you all. I bid you god speed.”

I saw the barest lift of his hat just as the doctor stepped back out of view, allowing our Joe to exit the carriage. The door had clicked shut, and we’d started up again with nary a sound. Now, we were on our own, and our safety depended upon me.

I decided that this was a good time to pray.

***

Chapter 11

We had just settled back in, with our *Joe* now as the driver, and Old Mary behind us carrying a few light wares. She was to be our getaway horse if the need should arise, which I sorely hoped would never be the case. I thought I heard a far away sound of thunder, but dared not look out the window. We had agreed that we could not be taken together, *Joe* and I, should the worst come to pass. So, while we traveled through the night, and it was still too dark to continue to learn my letters, too worried to sleep, I had prayed. Not that I had any real hope that the Good Lord above would hearken to my prayers for freedom. Even I was not light enough skinned for that. A clap of thunder startled me, as if to agree with the thought. The Lord who wished us to be in bondage to such men as the Senator could never truck with slaves disobeying their masters, and running, as we were, as Hagar had done. Yet, that same Lord had also shown mercy to Hagar, and soothed her pain. Had he not? That was all I felt I had a right to ask for, and so, ask, I did. I prayed that our pursuers would not find us, for well did the Lord above know how hard it had gone with us, to make us run, and how much harder it would go with us, should we be caught. I begged, in His mercy, that He light our way, as He had for the Children of Israel as they escaped their harsh bondage in Egypt, for had we three not indeed been used as harshly as those led by Moses up out of the house of the master and his whip? I prayed that if we could not be free in deed, as those born or bought free were, then at least let us become able to live free from the snares of the devil who would have us prostituted out, prizes to any white man who wanted us and was powerful enough to afford us. Finally, I had prayed that we might escape the horrors of this life entirely, should the Lord, in His favor, which was evidently not toward those of our color, see fit after all to allow our

capture. For what had we three done to deserve the fate that awaited those who ran, no matter how harsh their masters had been?

As I was finishing my prayers, the storm seemed to move off. Our young Tilly looked up at me from the opposite bench, where she seemed to have slept as well as a little angel, and smiled. How this child's mischievous little smile could shine through all of this darkness, I could not tell, but with that smile also came the rising sun, just beginning to send its first rays through the curtains. One of our stomachs also began to rumble with that rising sun, but alas, I recalled that we had eaten all that we had with us in our meager meal the night before, having had to speed away in such haste.

As I began to think of some way to apologize to little Tilly for being unable to feed her anything until we could safely stop for provisions, she winked, as if already knowing my thoughts. She then produced an apple, and a small paring knife, as if by art of magic, from out of no where.

"Where did you get those, you mischievous little angel?"

"I saved them like *Mr. Joe* told me to, Missus," She kipped brightly.

Then, she leaned forward, and in a lower voice, as if anyone could possibly hear us above the ruckus of our carriage wheels and two horses' hooves, she continued, "I am to always keep an apple in my pocket, and this knife tucked away in my skirts."

She polished the apple on her chemise, and then began to cut into it. I put my hand out to stop her, and her head bobbed up toward me, a look of worry, it seemed, on her young face.

“I can do it, Miss Willow, I know how. And your dress is way to pretty to risk getting sticky with this juice.”

She nodded down toward the juice running from the cut in the apple, as she continued her work.

“No, Tilly, I am quite sure that you are able, but I want you to have that apple. I imagine that our *Joe* has saved one up top, as well?”

The child had stopped only for a moment, before recommencing the division of her fruit.

“Yes, Missus, Joe also has one, because his pants also have pockets. But your nice dresses don’t have pockets, so I am always to carry one for you, aaaaand...” she reached into her skirt pocket, which I had not even imagined was there, producing a second apple, “and one for me.”

The grin on her face was so impish that I had no choice but to laugh.

“Well, then, why are you cutting that one, Tilly?”

“So you won’t have to, Miss Willow. A Virginia lady couldn’t sticky-up her fingers cutting her own apple slices, of course.”

She had begun to imitate that other voice I knew so well, the voice of Anna when she was making an cutting observation that was also meant to be funny. While it was good for young Tilly to have something on her person that she could use as a weapon if need be, I couldn't help but notice that this humor also conveniently kept the knife out of my hands. I resigned myself to playing this game, now, as it was my acting, above all, that would assure the safety of us all.

"Very well, then."

I reached out my hand for the first slice, hoping that this ruse of ours would not end up changing me into the very thing which I detested. As she placed the first slice into my open palm, she bowed her head.

"Thank you, Tilly."

Was the child trying to avoid seeing the tears in my eyes?

***

Chapter 12

“Be sure that there are no portraits of her in any of these advertisements.”

The hireling’s questioning look was met with a snort of disdain from the Senator, who lifted his head, staring hard at the man:

“Do you think I want her knowing that I am searching for her, you fool? No, let her think that I have given up the search, that it has been too long. Let her believe that she is safe, for a while. She should not be able to read, as I have taken great pains to prevent such folly, so posting this notice with only her description will allay her suspicions, and she will play into our hand.”

“What do you mean to do then, sir?”

Was it not obvious? It was clearly time to find a new odd jobs man. This fool had not even a single original thought in his head. When he clacked his tongue in irritation, the imbecile actually trembled. *And a coward, to boot.* After throwing him a look of utter disgust, the Senator made a gesture:

“Take these words down for an additional posting. I will pay every tavern owner and their hired hands, even to the meals and lodging, if they will hold my Fancy Gal Ann for me, wherever she may be, and double the reward if they can keep her from leaving the state of Maryland.”

“But sir, for all that money, you may as well buy yourself another Fancy, a younger one.”

The Senator lifted his walking cane, hefting it, and then pointing it with a cruel smile at his hired man’s head:

“Have you not heard me? I will have my Ann back, my Ann, and no other, whatever the price.”

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Chapter 13

We continued on most of that day, our bellies empty, but wishing to get as far away as quickly as possible from the home of Dr. H. and his wife so as to avoid, to the extent that we could, putting them in any further danger, should we be questioned or caught. We had risked a short stop to send young Tilly to a well to draw enough water for the three of us for a few days and to feed the horses, but apart from that break, we continued on into the night. I worried that Old Mary, tied up behind us, might be starting to tire, but our *Joe* would have to be the judge of that. I wondered how close we might be, now, to the border with Pennsylvania, the first state where we might dare to hope for a bit of succor, or at least some small lessening of our dangerous position. While we knew that never would we be safe until touching the soil of Canada, nothing was so dangerous as being taken here in a slave state. I had been too anxious to do more, as we rode, than stare at my letters, whilst going over our story again and again, to be certain that I had those life-saving details learned by heart.

My precautions were wisely taken.

Before we could get to the next station house, we encountered a tavern keeper, apparently out to put her lantern out before going to bed, by the looks of it. She made eye contact, and waved at me before I was able to draw my window curtain, certainly perplexed to see a lady out this late on the road. *Joe* must have felt that we had no choice but to stop, although the plan had been to pass by all roadside taverns in the darkness until we came to our safe haven, the next Station along the way. I saw with dread that we were drawing to a stop, as the woman ran to meet us. I only hoped that she had not seen any postings with our faces draw upon them. The reward for all three of us would surely lighten the heart of any tavern owner out in this part of Maryland. Our lack of male

escort would instantly give us up, it seemed to me, as fugitives, but there was nothing to do but play this Peculiar game until the ruse was discovered. I must try. Our *Joe* was already dismounted, and holding Captain's reins, bowing to the woman as she approached the carriage. She looked them both over, as if searching for something, before calling to our *Joe*.

"Oh, you need not bow to me, Hon, I am a simple honest working woman. I would speak with your mistress a moment."

By her familiar treatment, she must be from Baltimore, where I heard tell that some of the white folk were less ill disposed to those of our condition than in Virginia. As the woman arrived at the door of our carriage, I hid my face as I pinned my hair up, taking as deep a breath as my bodice would allow, before facing my first test. I put on my finest and most haughty voice, as I had seen the ladies of the Commonwealth treat with domestics or working class white people such as this tavern keeper appeared to be, during my stays with the Senator in the Federal City:

"Good evening, to you, good woman. Why have you stopped me in my journey, pray tell?"

From the curtsy she dropped me, she appeared to be a domestic, rather than the owner, but then why flag us down? She looked up and squinted at me, as though trying to recall something, and then let out a short cackle of a laugh.

"It's well past evening, Miss, that is for sure. I was just putting out the lantern for the night, being so late and all, but I have a room available that would be quite suitable for a lady," the woman

stole a quick glance toward the front of the carriage, “and even a small bed in the stable, for your driver. It’s not good to be about at night nowadays, what with this robber out on the loose in these parts.”

Robber? I tried to give her as haughty a look as I could manage, preparing to recite our story as I had practiced. Before I could speak, she hurried on, as if she were more nervous than I was.

“Oh, yes, Miss, there is a lascivious negro robber about. Stole Charles Price’s gal from down Washington way just the other month or so.”

She glanced sideways before continuing.

“Most likely long out of the state by now. But let’s not stand about out here in the cold discussing such unpleasantness. Have your driver come on around to the front so we can get you settled in to that lovely warm room, Miss.”

I must have blanched, for she stepped closer, nearly right up against the door of the carriage, hands rushing toward me as if I were falling.

“Are you all right, Miss? Have you taken cold? We must get you in right away.”

Looking back toward the tavern, she shouted:

"Lizzy, be quick, go up and get our best room warmed for the lady," who must have been the help, and then straightened and looked back toward the front of the carriage to shout at *Joe*.

"Driver, take your mistress around to the entrance, right away. She looks to have taken a chill!"

It all happened so quickly that none of us had time to object. This woman was clearly in the habit of giving orders, despite her earlier familiar tone with our *Joe*. I knew that among the papers that Dr. H. had given us was also some money, but I had no idea how much, nor what the cost of these lodgings might be. I only hoped that it would be enough not to draw suspicion.

We drew to a stop before the door of the tavern, and Tilly opened the door and leapt out lightly, bowing her head as she placed a low stool for me to step on, and I descended from the carriage. I was amazed at how her tiny frame could carry all of our baggage from within the carriage, but remembered, I hoped, my own role in time to draw myself up to my full height, imitating the ladies whom I had seen visiting the mansion back in Virginia.

I contented myself with following Tilly, who followed the one that must have been Lizzy, up to our rooms, as I hoped that all was going well enough with our *Joe,* who was busy getting Captain and Old Mary settled into the stables. I felt terrible that not only were we to be separated this night, but even worse, that Anna's bed must be with the horses, even if that might make for greater security for the carriage. I was about to ask Tilly to go down and ask the tavern women to see that a

meal was sent out to the stable, when a knock came at our door. Tilly ran to answer it, opening and folding into a curtsy as she turned to face me. I could see that it was our hostess, whom I still supposed to be the tavern keeper, holding a tray of tea and biscuits.

"I brought you up some supper, or what was left of supper, in any case, as we've just finished cleaning up the kitchen for the night. I see that Lizzy has built up a good fire, and I hope she has warmed the bed to your satisfaction, Miss?"

The woman had entered the room before I could get a word in edgewise, and walked across to me, holding the tray out. Tilly intercepted it instantly, and I saw the slightest downward tilt of the woman's mouth as she handed it over. What was going on, here?

She continued, while observing me closely:

"I'll send Lizzy up in the morning with your breakfast, Miss, to collect the fees, unless you want to sign a bill of credit with your husband or family seal?"

Her hesitation clearly indicated that this woman wanted to know who we were.

I was so tired that I thought I could nearly pull off feigning a fainting episode, so I allowed myself to sway a little on my feet, and put an arm out, which little Tilly expertly caught, as I put a hand to my head, and answered:

"Yes, tomorrow. That will be fine."

But the woman did not leave. Instead, she continued to regard me as if looking at some sort of puzzle which she was unable to decipher. I straightened my back, stared at her in what I hoped appeared to be a stern gesture, and forced myself to grunt out the words in my most disdainful tone:

"I am very fatigued."

"Yes," she replied in what could almost have passed for a disappointed tone of voice, "I see. Well, Miss, I only wanted to wish you a good night, and to tell you to take all precautions as you travel. You can see why for yourself, here."

The woman held out a paper that I imagined to be the local gazette for me to see, which young Tilly took from her with a bowed head, and delivered to me with a deep curtsy. I continued to look up at the woman, perplexed.

"Why, Miss, did you not see the posting? Your young driver there could be the little brother of this Anna Marie Weems the papers are looking for, with them freckles."

I looked at the posting, but there was no drawing, only words that I could not quite make out. This was not good. Now it became clear that this woman had been testing me, and that I was fast failing the test. We had to leave, this night, before she could summon men to capture us. I opted to continue playing the haughty Virginia lady:

“Indeed? Well, this should be interesting, in the morning. Now, you must excuse me, for I am very fatigued. I pray you see that my servant is fed in the stables, and my horses, and I bid you good night.”

I stared at her in the look of dismissal I had seen worn of the faces of those ladies from Virginia, and this time I did not fail, for she turned to leave, only hesitating at the door, as Tilly was bringing me my tea, her head bowed and her tiny body folded into that perfect curtsy of hers. As soon as the tavern keeper closed our door, I whispered to Tilly to go tell our *Joe* everything that she had seen, carrying a leftover biscuit and some sugared tea as a secret treat, in case she was stopped along the way.

Just when we needed the rest.

I sighed. *Why, Oh, Lord, have we no place to lay our heads?*

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Chapter 14

Little Tilly scampered back into the room after only half of her usual curtsy, so over-excited did she seem after speaking with Anna. She had closed the door almost silently, and crossed the room in three light bounds. She stood on her tip toes, placing her lips nearly in my ear to tell me:

"*Joe* says that we are to wait two hours, and then come down to the stable with all of our things, and the leftover food, in *utter silence*."

I hugged little Tilly to my bosom, relieved to see that Anna's gift for reading my mind, or perhaps it was our shared gift for thinking alike, was still intact. The long ride these past days had seemed like an eternity, hidden away in the carriage as we were, leaving our *Joe* to take most of the visible risk. I longed to have even a moment alone with her, but for the moment, safety was our priority. I looked about the room, seeing that Tilly had quite nearly already gathered up our affairs, and so I set about bundling all of the leftover biscuits, and even the rest of the sugar cone, into the tavern napkins, feeling only a mild fleck of guilt over stealing the owner's linen. Seeing as how that woman was attempting to help steal our very persons, it seemed a fair trade. *And Captain and Old Mary will be glad that this out of the way place is ten years behind the times.* That was, unless we ourselves had greater need of the precious energy bound up in that old cone of sugar.

I heard the old clock downstairs strike the hour, and wondered what we would do with ourselves as we waited for it to strike twice more. Anna certainly needed the rest, but for my part, I dared not fall asleep, afraid to risk missing the crucial second striking of the clock, in spite of how loud it seemed to my ears. How anyone got a decent night's sleep in this tavern was beyond me.

That old clock must be the pride and joy of the owner, to keep it here and risk losing customers. Then it hit me. Tilly and I must try to time our footsteps with those of the striking clock, in just under two more hours. It would be three in the morning, and those three bell tones could well cover the sounds of our closing room door, and maybe even the sound as we closed the front door, could we be ever so quick about getting down those stairs.

There had to be a way to make it work. We would need to plan our exit carefully, so that I could be at the front door, with some excuse should that woman be up and about, while Tilly stayed upstairs to close our room door upon the first chime of the clock. I had had plenty of practice at tiptoeing around an old house, and was confident that I could make my way down the stairs silently before the clock began to strike. But covering the distance between our room and the outside door in the three seconds during which the clock would strike, without making a sound, was something that only our little Tilly could likely pull off. Since there was already an extra chamberpot in the room, that would not do as an excuse, for it was far too cold to expect a valuable young body servant to go outside to use the privy in the dark. Not when there was supposed to be a "negro stealer" about, in any case. The limits of being a Virginia lady now made it as difficult to steal away in the night as it had been simple to put off the tavern keeper with an authoritative word. A headache, perhaps, or my young servant being too short to search in the kitchens for some bit of potion in a cabinet, maybe? I looked over at Tilly, who was fast asleep on the bed, two bundles just within reach of each hand. This child was amazing. *Thou shalt not covet, Willow, even the ability to sleep.* I reminded myself to be grateful that at least one of us was able to rest.

The clock was in the middle of striking the start of the second hour, as I scrambled to find some reason for being downstairs in another hour, when a knock came at the door. It had been

barely audible over the resonating echo of the last chime from the clock, and I thought for a moment that I might have imagined it, until the door began to creep open. I hastily threw my shawl over Tilly and the bundles before slipping under the covers, managing to knock a pillow onto the floor beside me, hoping the intruder would mistake that pillow for Tilly, sleeping beside my bed, as a body servant ought to.

We had put the candles out as soon as Tilly returned from the stables, taking care to avoid moving around the room. Our ruse seemed to have worked, but now it was too dark to see any features of the head that peered into the room, facing the bed. I took several regular deep breaths in and out, to imitate sleep, as I had practiced back in Virginia when trying to avoid the Senator's late night attentions. The intruder appeared to be satisfied by this ruse, as the head withdrew, and the door closed as slowly and quietly as it had opened, only the barest click of the latch to be heard. Then, I heard another sound, one with which I was also familiar. A key turned in the lock, the slow scratching of metal on metal.

We've been locked in! I sat bolt upright in the bed, trying not to wake Tilly, while looking around the room for another door, or a window. There were none. But there was one saving grace. I knew the sound of a key being removed very well, for it was the sound that so often accompanied the voice of the Senator when he locked me into my rooms, depriving me of food for the crime of depriving him of the entire fulfillment of one of his appetites. He always took the key with him, to prevent one of the house servants from slipping me food when he was away. But the intruder tonight had left the key in the lock. Possibly to prevent us from seeing the hallway through the keyhole. But it also might allow me to persuade someone to let us out. No other means of escape

was possible. With the fire still hot, even if it might have gotten little Tilly out, even the chimney was out of the question.

Wait, the chimney! *How far are the stables from this room, I wonder?* Far enough to see the smoke from this chimney? Our fire had died down, and should be producing only a thin wisp of smoke now, barely visible, and quite normal for this time of the night. What would Anna think if she could see billowing clouds of smoke coming from only one fire in the house, at this time of night? Would she come to check, when we did not come down? Would she be able to see which room we were in? Would the key still be in the lock? No matter what the answers, I had to try.

There was plenty of wood for the fire, but nothing that might produce thick smoke. I built up the fire in the fireplace, placing as many logs as would easily fit, and then waited for the top log to burn down. Maybe half an hour passed, and I heard no sounds in the rest of the tavern. Surely that woman and the help had all gone to sleep by now, safe in the knowledge that we were locked in to this room, with no way of even seeing what was going on beyond our door. I found an extra blanket, and spilled a little water from the pitcher onto it until it was just damp, but not too heavy, and then I hefted it into the fireplace, trying to hold it above the top log, but it ended up in the fire. By the time I had hauled it back out, little Tilly was awake, and helping me douse the blanket, which had begun to smolder in some spots. I put my finger to my lips, making a key turning motion with my fingers as I jerked my head toward the door, and the poor child's face fell.

My heart nearly broke as I saw this beautiful child break down, for the first and what I hoped was the last time, in tears of desolation. Then I vowed that I would keep this child from harm, no matter what price I had to pay.

***

Chapter 15

He was feeling hungry.

Having just gotten word that they had what was likely to be both his Ann and that other fancy, his appetite was back. He stopped short, just as he was getting into his carriage:

“Ride on ahead and make certain that it is her. Be sure that no harm comes to my gal, now, you hear me?”

These low patrollers could be rather zealous in their work, which was commendable, but he would not risk any of them forgetting themselves with his Ann.

“Yes, sir, Senator. We won’t do her no harm.”

“Y’all had best better see to it that you do not.”

He would have her back, and this time, she would never leave him.

***

Chapter 16

Little Tilly had dropped the still smoking blanket, and crumpled to the floor. I rushed to cradle the child, rocking her back and forth as I desperately hoped no one had heard the floor boards creak, nor noticed the sudden smoke that must be filtering into other rooms, I worried. I tried to reassure the child as I smoothed down her tight curls:

"Don't you worry, Tilly, we will find a way out of this. We will."

Her tiny face tilted up to mine, still swimming in tears, as she demanded to know: "But how? How will we get out of this, Miss Willow, how?"

I put my finger to her lips, and whispered in her ear, as she had done for me, reminding her to "Fear not, and be of good courage, for the Lord is with us."

She somehow managed to stop crying, and even give me the tiniest bit of a smile. I pushed up my sleeves, pointed to the blanket, and grabbed the pitcher again, pouring more water on it, this time. Between the two of us, we managed to hold and flop the blanket a few times, interrupting the flow of smoke up the chimney at least twice. It might not have been an expert smoke signal, but we did manage to get a few clouds separated just as the clock struck three. It was time for us to have been going down to the carriage, and surely Anna would have been watching the house by now. We made a couple more good clouds over the next quarter of an hour, and then we threw the blanket aside, as we realized that our plan must have worked, or so we fervently hoped. Little Tilly threw

me a worried look before folding her bitty body into a deep curtsy, standing between myself and the door, playing her role to the last, for the sound we heard, as we held that now nearly entirely charred blanket over the fire, was that of the key turning in the door, ever so quietly.

I held my breath, ready to play my role, as well, drawing myself up to my full height, preparing to give my haughtiest speech and my most disdainful look, should it be anyone other than Anna coming through that door.

The welcome face of my dear Anna wore her almost ever present look of mischief, and by the light of the fire, I could have sworn that I actually saw her wink! I started to douse the fire, but held off at a gesture from Anna. She added a log, and then beckoned for us to follow her out into the hallway. She closed the door ever so carefully, and then somehow managed to turn the key in the lock, without making a sound. *How does she do that?* She withdrew the key, again without any noise at all, and pocketed it as she turned, making a 'Follow me' motion to lead us in the opposite direction from the front door stairway. As she pushed open a door, I realized that of course there had to be a service stairway, for the help. That, of course, was a place in which no lady could be, so I had no official knowledge of it, so to speak, when playing my role, but our ruse had definitely been uncovered, now. In a way, it was a relief, for now, I would no longer need to benefit, even in pretense, from such an odious institution. We hurried down the stairs and found ourselves crossing another doorway that led directly into the stables. Anna deftly took both sacks from Tilly, and in nearly one motion swept them into her saddle bags, and Tilly up onto Captain, as I mounted Old Mary, who was already saddled and waiting patiently for me. I had no need to use my reins for ought but to hold steady, as my beloved old mount followed in the wake of Captain, keeping up with ease, as we walked quickly through the yard and out into what seemed to me nothing more

than an open field, but which Anna clearly knew well, for no sooner had we gotten into a small wooded area, some distance from the tavern, she wheeled Captain around, which Old Mary followed without any prodding on my part, and with a click of her tongue, we all leapt into a gallop.

This time, I stretched my neck along that of Old Mary, and made sure to keep one hand on the pommel, and the other wrapped tightly into her mane. My stirrups had already been shortened so that I did not lose them as my heels hugged Old Mary's flanks, or what I imagined to be her flanks, almost touching the saddle bags. We ran for our very lives, as we knew not when our pursuers might close in, surely having been destined to arrive by morning at that accursed tavern. I understood how the fear of a man like the Senator could drive one to do such a thing, but I had seen no fear in the tavern keeper's eyes when she had apparently been deciding to turn us in. All that I had seen in that woman's eyes had been greed.

***

Chapter 17

“I am sorry, really sorry, Sir, but somehow, I do not know how they did it, but somehow, they got away, Sir.”

The sun was shining, the weather was dry, and it was still early enough in the morning to catch up with them. Ignoring the foolish woman, he had turned to his head overseer:

“Did you bring the dogs?”

“Yes, Senator, I did.”

“Good. They already know her scent,” he paused, squeezing the muslin petticoats as he held them to his nose, “so you let those dogs loose, and you find her, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Sir, Senator, we will-”

“You find her, and bring her back to me, in one piece, you hear?”

These imbeciles were useless, but he would find his Ann. If she was with the Price gal, which was certain, now, it seemed that there would be yet another party added to this game, shortly.

It seemed that the two fancies had a little pickaninny with them, and the three of them had most certainly had help, or else they had managed to steal that carriage and the horses, which he sorely doubted. His Ann was certainly not capable of such a thing, and that Price gal was just a city fancy with free issue parents, so how could she possible have pulled off something like that without help? It was these damned abolitionists, hiding here in the state of Maryland. *No shelter for these heathens in my Commonwealth, by God.* He would have to lodge a formal complaint with the Maryland delegation, get Price to make some inquiries. They couldn't be too far, those damned thieves, whoever had given them that set of carriage and horses. How did those gals manage to talk their way in to this tavern, any way?

He turned back to the woman, who began to tremble visibly, as he glared at her.

"Tell me, woman, how did it come that you allowed my gal and those other two slaves into your establishment, in the first place? Was it not evident to you that they were not of a sufficiently high station to warrant the sort of hospitality to which you treated them?"

"No, sir, Senator, sir, they was, it was, they were not, I mean to say-"

"Speak, woman!"

"That is, Senator, sir, that they looked like a fine lady should ought to look, dressed nice, and smelled of lavender, what with a little body servant and all-"

“Since when have you ever seen a body servant that small, you fool? And you even have the unprecedented nerve to try to charge me for your stupidity, woman? How dare you?”

The tavern keeper cowered as he shouted at her, lowering her head, *finally, starting to learn her place*, and stammering something about a blanket. The foolish woman seemed to think he should pay her for having lost his Fancy.

“Not one Virginia cent!”

He raised his cane, advancing upon the woman as she backed away while uttering a steady stream of apologies. As the Senator was about to teach her a lesson she’d not soon forget, riders came up the road, one stopping to hail him:

“We found a trail, but it goes cold about a mile out. Price’s dogs led us to it, and we found this.”

The man held up a muddied driver’s cap.

“So, Price’s gal is smarter than I thought. I might just have to buy that gal, teach her her place, when this is all over.”

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Chapter 18

Little Tilly riding with Anna was a great relief, as I could barely keep my seat, grateful once again to Old Mary's training and sensitivity. The intelligent beast not only managed to keep up with Captain, but even helped me stay balanced as we fled for our safety, if not our very lives. I clung to pommel and mane, every muscle now beginning to ache as I squeezed my heels and hugged the neck of my mount, working to stay seated and hoping to be as little of a burden as possible. We stayed at this gallop for so long that I felt sure our poor horses must drop from exhaustion, the breath from Old Mary beginning to sound more like ragged gusts of wind as a hurricane moves in, than her normal breathing. Even I could tell that we must stop soon, if we did not wish to push our only means of escape to the point of over exhaustion. But I knew that I must trust Anna, and her sense of both our horses, and our pursuers. I had no idea where we were, now, but I did know that those men, and our chains, could not be far, and would certainly not tarry in their search for us.

I was beginning to seriously worry about Old Mary, breathing so hard in this cold, when at last, we began to slow, finally coming to a fast walk, still in the woods. I finally dared to lift my aching neck from Old Mary's mane as we approached what appeared to be an even more dense thicket of trees up ahead in the already heavily wooded distance. The sounds of these woods seemed dampened by a sudden start of falling snow. It would have been marvelous to behold, had we not been in mortal danger. The horses seemed to catch their breath as we regained a semblance of calm, walking through those woods toward that copse of trees, that seemed like a little haven of forest within a forest, to my great wonder. The woods still held both a fear and a fascination for me to which I felt that my house-bound eyes were never likely to grow accustomed. I worried about how we might get any rest in this cold, and that with only a few biscuits to nibble upon to help us

keep warm. At least this snow would ensure that we would not lack for water, if we could risk a small fire to melt it. Maybe even make some tea, as I had scooped up even the tea leaves when I had packed that sugar cone to bring with us. Now, we would need all of the nourishment those meager rations could give us, it seemed.

We had to dismount and enter one by one, squeezing both horses through the tiny space, Little Tilly leading each one at a time, while Anna and I each held a small tree aside for them to pass. I had no idea how all five of us would fit into such a cramped space, but fit, we did. Again, as when we had encountered the patrol, and that poor bear, Anna made the horses lie flat down, with Tilly and I upon each of their backs, while she formed a shelter by bending the smallest of those trees all around us, mere inches, it seemed, above our heads. I was amazed that she had been able to find saplings able to be bent together, and then made to stay fast by tying their branches together, as if interlacing them, or weaving them, even, using some rope from Captain's saddlebags.

"You two stay down and don't move or make a sound," she whispered, crouched between us, "I am going to go find what to brush out our tracks, and cover us up."

We watched as she removed her boots and stuffed a bed of pine needles into each of them before putting them back on, then picked up several fallen branches, and climbed up one of the sturdier trees at the outside of our little island of forest within the woods. Then we began to hear the sounds of something falling to the ground, first near us, then all around our little island of trees. Anna, I imagined, must have decided that there had been little enough snow by the time we arrived, either that, or there was no way to brush out the tracks we might have made while getting here without leaving more in the freshly falling snow, and was thus attempting to mask our presence

with freshly fallen debris. She reappeared holding a bundle of branches and bark, which she began to interweave around us, filling in the gaps in the saplings which she had already bent around us.

Soon enough, save for a central opening above left by the bent saplings, we were enclosed in a tiny room, made out of living trees. It was such a wonder to both of our eyes that Tilly and I gasped in joy and amazement as Anna pointed up, for us to behold her handiwork. There was already a thick enough carpet of fallen pine needles on the ground to provide a fairly decent floor for us, so we spread a spare blanket before unsaddling the horses and using the gear for our resting places. There was barely enough room to crawl around, so the poor horses had to remain where they had lain down, for the time being, it seemed. I had heard it said that if a horse did not stand upon its feet, even to sleep, that it would die, and I hoped that this was not true, for that idea brought me great fear for Old Mary, not to mention Captain, but I knew that Anna would do nothing that would endanger the health of our horses, for their sakes and also for our own. We fed the horses first, after giving them such water as we could, using the wash basin from her pack. She seemed to always carry such tools as to be ready for anything, which I greatly admired. We then put the basin out in the center of our little shelter, below the opening in the saplings, in the hope of catching some snow, which was now starting to fall more thickly than I had ever seen snow fall in my entire life.

After doling out their ration of the feed we carried, Anna took care to brush both of the horses with a bundle of pine needles wrapped together. That done, as our mounts rested, we took some nourishment from the leftovers we had saved from that dastardly tavern, counting out the biscuits, and chipping off a bit of sugar from our sugar cone for both ourselves and the horses. How long we were to stay here was a mystery to me, and so I had no idea how much of our food we

ought to save for later. I looked up at Anna, the question written in my face, to which she responded:

"Let's eat all of it, so that we can keep warm this night, and then we shall see what to do in the morning."

She must have caught the question in my raised eyes, for she added:

"I tossed out my old cap back there, just before we changed direction to come up here, so I think that should give us just a bit of time to rest, but not much. And I would rather not risk a fire, just yet."

I had hardly remarked the passage of time as we fled, only knowing that it seemed to be an eternity that we rode, and it must have seemed even longer for the poor beasts that had to carry us. We had left in the wee hours of the morning, well before sunrise, and ridden for what had felt like the entire day. Now, I thought it must be around the noon meal time of day, since the sun had only just been reaching the height of about the middle of the sky when I noticed that it was beginning to cloud over, and the snow began to fall quickly thereafter. So if we were to spend the rest of this afternoon and the entire night here, with no fire, she was right, we would need to eat all that we had. But then, what would we eat after that? As I began to worry, I saw Anna fiddling with some twine, wrapping it in a complicated fashion about some sticks at the edge of our shelter. She reached her hand under the bottom of an opening in the makeshift wall, just out beyond the edge of our little shelter, and placed her contraption outside, on the ground. She then turned, dug in the saddlebags for two water flasks, handing one to each of us, and sitting back with her own, taking small sips before handing back both her own two biscuits, saying:

“Go on and eat these, too, both of you,” placing one in the hand of Little Tilly, then smiling and motioning for the child to eat it.

“I made sure to eat all of the leftovers that Lizzy had brought out for their stable hands before I came to get you,” then she favored us with her most delicious and wicked of grins as she lifted an eyebrow, “so I have had more to eat than you all got, by the looks of your room back there.”

We three had a good, if very quiet, laugh, at their expense. Then I finally took the chance to ask a vain question which I had been dying to ask.

“Did you see our smoke, did it work,” I asked, curious to know if my trick, which I had heard that the Indians still used out West, had helped at all.

“But didn’t you know, Miss Willow?”

She nodded, looking like a proud teacher whose student has excelled at the day’s lesson.

“That was exactly what brought me up to you!”

Tilly and I beamed with pride, too, as she went on to say:

“I could hear the clock striking the hour after my catnap, and I wondered what all of that smoke was, and that got me up. It was perfect timing, too. The barn hands were gone for the night before anyone went to bed, so it was just me outside, and I had already seen Lizzy’s light go out just as soon as she had brought my supper out to me, such as it was, and then I saw that old goat’s light upstairs go out just after our Tilly here” she reached out her hand to brush Tilly’s cheek, bringing a smile to those bright little eyes, while continuing, “brought me that paper, of which I could make out only one word on the page, but it was the one word that kept me watching and waiting for -”

“Oh, no, Anna, you didn’t get any sleep? It has been so long and you must be so very tired,” I cried, cutting off her words in my chagrin for her.

She held up both hands in a calming gesture.

“Oh, I made sure to cat nap, like I said, don’t you worry, my Willow tree,” and then she reached out both hands to hold my face, bringing the blood to my cheeks as I reached out to caress her hair, and then I recalled Little Tilly sitting right beside me, making my blush even hotter.

Anna shifted her weight forward enough to glide closer to me, putting her lips to my ear to whisper, “I sleep very lightly, but I sleep well, for I dream of you, my wondrous Willow.”

The thrill of ecstasy which ran through me made me forget all about Little Tilly, throwing my arms around my sweet Anna to hold her close, trying to drink in all of her essence in that very

instant. It really was only an instant, in fact, for just at that moment, our Tilly reminded us of just how little she really was, by making an uncomfortable, but inevitable announcement:

"I need to use the chamberpot, please."

Anna and I parted quickly, both of our faces feverish with embarrassment, and I dug out the chamberpot from Old Mary's saddlebag, which was also my seat, and handed it to Tilly. As I wondered what we would do with the contents when she was done, I noticed that Anna was digging a hole with some small tool, in another spot just outside our shelter, not far from where she had set up her twine and stick contraption. When I made a face, my hands up, to ask what she was doing, she plopped her tool, which turned out to be a small shovel or gardening spade, into my left hand just as Tilly placed the chamberpot into my right, and then Anna took that from me, proceeding to tilt the vessel with both hands out, managing to tip all of the contents right into the hole she had just dug, before trading with me again. I didn't even have time to blink before Tilly had taken the burden from my hand and placed the cover on it, wrapping it away in the saddlebag. In the meantime, Anna finished replacing the dirt she had dug up, covering the chamberpot contents in the hole with what looked like a satisfied smile on her lips. As she finished, wiped her spade with some pine needles and put it away, and peeked out at her contraption, then saw the tilt of my head as I watched her, her smile grew broader.

"This, ladies," she looked from me to Tilly and back, "is how we trap tomorrow's breakfast."

As Tilly and I exchanged perplexed looks, Anna merely contented herself with packing down the snow, which by now had nearly filled our wash basin, and smiling like the cat who ate the

last of the cream. The three of us snuggled together next to the horses under all of our blankets, two of us drifting off, me into a sleep filled with images of dancing stick puppets, and one sleeping with her arms around me, keeping her secret safe until morning.

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Chapter 19

He sat down at the writing desk, ready to make a new plan. After riding through the night to get here, only to the find that this stupid woman had let his Ann slip through her fool fingers, he had gone up to survey the room. It was bad enough that that woman had given them a room. His Fancy and her pickaninny had evidently made a sufficiently convincing impression upon this back country Maryland cracker come inn keeper that she had taken them, at first, for a Lady and her body servant. At least she'd had the good sense not to give them a room with a window. But letting them get away was the height of folly. Now, not only this Maryland crab woman, but also he, himself, would look the fool to any who were following this debacle in the papers. Price had been advertising for his gal, this Weems gal, thinking she had been carried off by a white man. Now, however, it was evident that this was not the case. The room those gals had stayed in for so short a time showed signs that those darkies had burnt something in the fireplace before somehow getting out of the room. He would have to interrogate the staff here, personally. It was obvious that the fool of a woman who ran the place was too stupid to be trusted, so he had installed himself in the inn keeper's rooms, and ordered her to attend to his staff. Let Loving deal with this fool, and with Price and his boys. Posting ads in the papers. He snorted. Waiting for someone else to find and bring his property back to him. Tom foolery. Price could post in the papers and hope that someone would do his work for him, but the Senator was not a man to wait around for his quarry to come to him. He had always prided himself on his forward thinking, on his vision. Both for his Commonwealth, and for his domestic affairs. So it was time to show these fools, that climber Price along with the rest of them, how to learn from their betters. He would show them how a real gentleman hunted, as no one else seemed competent at the simple act of retrieving his property. He gestured to his personal secretary, a nervous man, always fidgeting, but at least he was a competent servant.

“Loving!”

The man darted over, pen already hovering over the bit of paper he seemed to carry everywhere with him, as though ready to take a letter at any moment. Good man, if a bit sentimental.

“Yes, Senator!”

“Loving, I want you to send word to Price. Tell him to have his boys place themselves up at the border with that damned Yankee commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and to be ready to give a show.”

That would give those fools something useful to do, start setting the trap, while his boys came up with the bait.

“A show, sir?”

The Senator rose and gave an irritated huff. Loving was an excellent secretary, but the man was entirely useless when it came to dealing with the darkies. Every time there was even the slightest correction to be given to any of them, the man had to excuse himself, as if he were some damned damsel in distress, until the whipping was over. The Senator was willing to bet that the man couldn’t hold his liquor, either, but he’d honestly never seen him drink.

Rounding the desk, the Senator stepped near Loving, not wishing any prying Maryland ears to catch this: “Yes, man, a show, as usual when the darkies try to abscond, what do you think I said?!”

Loving blanched, the man’s face turning as pale as if he’d seen the ghost of his own great grandfather, and the Senator turned on his heel, disgusted with the fool’s womanish hysteria. How could the man be a real Virginian, if he even was, with such a cowardly disposition? He called over his shoulder:

“Just tell Smith to bring the gals from Robey’s and Yellow, and bring them up to meet us at that damned border.”

Why did the man look so stupid? Why was Loving was just standing there, scratching something onto his paper, an absurd look on his face.

“What is it, man? Speak.”

“Well, Senator, sir, it’s this. That border is a long line, sir-”

“Yes, man, do you not think that I know what the Mason and Dixon Line is? And so?”

“Well, sir, it’s just that we wouldn’t know where to send them, sir. How many towns are there along the border, that we should know which one to go to?”

Why could this man not speak in the normal way? By God, did this man always speak in Biblical sentences? Did he not know that the Authorized Version, the King James Bible of 1611, was a very long time ago? Still, his secretary did have a point. He would have to choose a likely town where those gals might try to cross out of the good state of Maryland. And they might still have help. Those damned abolitionists were like fleas up in Philadelphia, and if this fool's tavern were a little farther east, that would have made sense, but these gals swung west, almost out to Frederick. *Must have been trying to throw us off.* So, that Price gal must have thought that no one would be looking for them this far west. Didn't know the extent of the resources available, nor of the efforts to which he, the Senator, was willing to go. Of course not. How could any slave know the mind of her master? Even this Price gal, intelligent quadroon that she seemed to be, couldn't possibly know. He turned back to face Loving:

"Send them to Shrewsbury."

"Yes, Senator."

"And send in that fool woman's cook, right now. I wish to speak with her."

"Yes, sir."

He would set a trap for them, show them who was the master, make them learn who were their betters. Both of them.

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Chapter 20

Little Tilly was still asleep when I awoke, snuggled into the arms of my beloved Anna. Or at least, I hoped Tilly was asleep. Anna's embrace was warm enough to keep for me as I tucked my own blanket around Tilly, who was tucked almost under the belly of Old Mary. As I turned back to lie down again, I saw that Anna was awake, and watching me. Her way of seeing everything without giving anything away no longer surprised me. Now it was one of the things that I counted on, and loved her for, so much. She held up her blanket, inviting me to snuggle next to her, and sending a rush of heat from my toes to my eyelids. I gladly wrapped my arms around her, while she did the same, and we pulled each other closer than it seemed we had ever been.

We both lay still, each gazing into the face of the other. *You are comely, my beloved.* Then, Anna's face changed, and from the look of contentment, it fell to one of worry. This was not a look I was accustomed to seeing on that beautifully mischievous face.

"What is troubling you, my love?"

Had I just said that? Her smile both relieved my fears, and confirmed that I had indeed just said that.

"My love," she had repeated, before taking my hand and kissing it so tenderly that I thought my heart would soar up beyond these woods and into the heavens with delight. But then, she looked at me again, and her look was a serious one.

“We need to discuss something,” she said, while entwining her fingers through mine.

With those long fingers enlaced through mine, we could discuss anything she wanted, as far as I was concerned. But her worried look gave me pause. If something was troubling Anna, then it was a serious matter indeed. I looked into her lightly freckled face, sitting up slightly, as she did, so that I could pay full attention to her words.

“What is it, Anna?”

Then I thought of that woman holding the paper, and of how I had failed to read the posting that was clearly meant to test my reaction.

“Is it something I did?”

She took my hand in both of hers:

“No, not at all, my lovely Willow, nothing you have done.”

Then she looked somewhat abashed: “but there is something you must do, and it will be a very difficult thing, I fear,” she looked almost on the verge of tears, which I had never seen in her before, “for both of us.”

“I don’t understand, Anna, what must I do, what can I do to make you happy, whole, or as close to it as I can. Tell me what I must do, anything, and I shall, for you.”

I squeezed her hands in mine as I waited for her to answer.

“Well, you agree, do you not, that they now know without a doubt that we are all traveling together?”

I had to suppose that I’d been avoiding that thought. I suddenly recalled pondering the very question, myself, as I lay waiting in the darkness for the clock to strike, that first hour before the key had turned in our lock, and sent all other thoughts fleeing from my head.

“Yes, I suppose they must have suspected before, and now they must be certain, if that woman has told them about all three of us.”

Anna nodded, “She most likely would have, because even little Tilly must surely have a reward for holding her while they come…”

“Yes,” I agreed. “So, they know about our ruse, and that we are coming from a Station, too, no doubt.”

I hated to think what the Senator might do if he found the home of Dr. and Mrs. H. Even up here in Maryland, abolitionists were not well liked. In Virginia, they were downright despised.

"I hope that they are all right, the doc-"

"Shhh!" Anna hissed, startling me.

I looked around in fear that someone might be stalking our shelter, but she put up a calming hand, while giving a reassuring blink.

"No, I hear nothing in these woods, but you must empty your mind of that name, even of the memory of that Station."

Then, I understood. I nodded as I tried to hold back the tears which threatened to spill out of my eyes. This was no time to weaken. Nor to make mistakes that might give away our former benefactors. And what of those whom we were intended to stay with after that?

"So, what happens now," I asked, fearing that I already knew the answer, but not how to proceed.

"We cannot go on to the next Station, can we?"

"No, we cannot. The Conductor of that Station will have already waved off any other Arrivals, as well, since our ruse is known, and possibly also how we came by our carriage. Willow, my dearest Willow…"

I waited, my stomach in my throat for her next words.

“You know that it is not safe for me to stay with you.”

“I know, but there must be some other way.”

“There is no other way.”

“There must be.”

But she was shaking her head at me, and I knew that on this matter, she would say no more. Now I began to feel real fear, for I thought that I could see fear in my dear Anna’s eyes, but she took my hands again, straightened her back, and stiffened her neck, eyes clear and firm, once again, saying:

“They are now looking for us together, and it will be easy for them, and go hard on us all, should we continue on together.”

She continued to give me that steady look that reminded me that I had already known this, and that this must be the way.

I had indeed known. We could not stay together on this journey. Everyone would be in greater danger of capture. So now, we must discover a way to separate our escape, and each make

our own way North. One of us would have to shepherd our Tilly to another Station, and then go on alone.

And our little Tilly slept on. The child had the serene face of an angel as she slept. I almost couldn't help thinking that if she were free, this world might just be a decent place to live in, one day. Almost, but not quite, for that angelic face of hers could get our little Tilly into the same spot I had lived in for so many long years, and I did not wish that on anyone, neither man nor beast. For no one should have to live in a cage, no matter how many of its bars were made of gold.

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Chapter 21

The snow had continued to fall, becoming even faster than before, if that were possible, even though it felt just the slightest touch warmer, oddly enough, at least to my Virginia upbringing. We had filled all of our water flasks and every container we had with snow, and even used pine needles to double clean the chamber pot before setting it out when those were packed down and full. We had already divided up our rations, and separated our saddlebags as Tilly slept, the young child worn out from our harried adventures. I was grateful that for most of our trip, it seemed that this was how Tilly had taken it. For us, it was anything but an adventure.

Anna and I had settled back down to sleep after hashing out what details we could of a plan that we hoped would confuse and divide our pursuers. What Anna had left unsaid, when we spoke, was just as clear as our need to separate. Maryland slave trader Charles Price, her former master and still legal owner, was a power to be reckoned with in Montgomery County, even for the Senator. That meant that both of these beasts would be teaming up to hunt us down, and with the man who claimed ownership of our Tilly into the bargain. Three furious men, respected by a law in this world where that Peculiar Institution, which recognized us only as property, held sway, would be a fearsome lot to contend with. So not only must we go our separate ways, but we must also find a way to make them look in a direction that neither of us was headed, to buy us all time to make good our escape.

There was something else that gave me pause, as I reflected during the remaining hours while Tilly slept. Why had there been no picture of me, as was standard for a wealthy owner like the Senator to add to such runaway postings, in that paper? And why had that tavern owner known

about both Anna and myself, so far out here in the back country of this state, so far from the Federal City, where both of us started this dangerous endeavor, and from the main roads north? It made no sense.

Unless… My stomach began to churn as I allowed those awful thoughts to the surface. I squeezed Anna's hand for reassurance, but still fell back into those dark thoughts.

The fact that the tavern keeper had known to test me with that posting from what had indeed turned out to be the local paper, meant not only that the Senator was obviously advertising for me, but, also, given that there was no actual portrait of me, that he suspected that I might have become literate, by now, and been getting help. Or worse yet, he had even suspected that I might try such a ruse, which I could clearly never pull off on my own. That could only mean that he had already anticipated Anna and myself joining up to ride North together, how, I could not know, but then, he might assume that Miss Mary and Little Sal had also been in on the ruse. If that were the case, then he would have already interrogated both of them to get further information. Information which neither of them had.

I looked up, through the hole in the center of our little shelter, hoping to now be able to take my sighting at the stars above us and determine which way North might be from here, as Anna had taught me, but the sky was clouded over, snow even drifting thickly into every crevice of our shelter. We must be nearly entirely buried in snow, by this time, from the storm which seemed to have arisen only an hour or so ago. As I listened to the wind howl around us, I hoped desperately that Little Sally, Miss Mary, and everyone else I knew, were at least alive, if not safe.

Safe? That was simply too much to hope for, knowing the Senator.

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Chapter 22

He looked out the window of the inn keeper's office, no, *his* office, and all he could see was snow. The Senator had never liked snow. Stuck to everything, got dirty, made the horses slip, and made the darkies stand around lolly gagging instead of being about their God given tasks. Made everything take longer, especially in the Federal City. Why, Congress was about shut down due to this accursed storm, and word was that it was even worse out in western Maryland, up toward the Cumberland Gap, where he thought to find his Ann and that other fancy gal. But this unnatural abomination from the North, this snow storm, a Nor'easter intruding down upon the South, would never stop him from finding her. Her, and those other two that had absconded with her. He especially wanted to find her before they crossed into that damned Yankee state that had the gall to call itself a commonwealth. Price might believe that his Weems gal had been carried off by a white man, but it was evident that Price's nouveau riche arrogance was matched only by his stupidity, for it was abundantly clear that that damned uppity gal was the ring leader in this escapade. With the help of those damned abolitionists, of course. By God, it was time to teach them all a lesson. One that none of them would ever forget. Starting with these back water Maryland negro stealing thieves. Price should be useful, here, even outside of his county. A climber like him would still have significant influence over the other bootlicks in their State House. He rubbed his hands together as he hefted his bulk out of the chair, lumbering over to the fireplace. He had been here over a week, now, and those gals must think they were going to get away. What with this long storm and Price's incompetence, they damn nearly had, too. But all this snow would also make it more difficult for them to move, and easier for Smith and his boys to track. *I will have you back, my Ann.* Time to start putting the first part of his plan in motion:

"Loving,"

Why on earth was the man not in his expected place, ready to attend him? He pounded his fist on the mantle over the fireplace, knocking down some useless thing that woman had left up there, which he slid out from underfoot with a kick. The next kick would be for his secretary, if the man did not materialize this instant.

“Where the devil are you?”

Finally, the sound of footsteps scurrying down the hall approached. His man was taking long enough. Dawdling when he needed to know the whereabouts of his head overseer right now. He shouted down the hall:

“Has there been any word yet, from Smith?”

His secretary scrambled into the room, pen inked and paper in hand, as usual.

“I beg your pardon, Senator, I’ve not been feeling too well-”

“I asked you about Smith, man, not about your damned ailments. Now will you tell me if there has yet been any word from Smith, if you please?”

That got the man’s attention. Not feeling too well. Feeling, indeed. This fool got the runs just watching a simple whipping. No good around the darkies at all, so there was no use having him handle any of this part of the plan. He needed Smith, here. Right now. With his dependable boys

and his properly trained dogs. Smith would have to bring the full gang up from back home, which would take a while in all of this mess. It would have been easier down there, being in direct control of this whole endeavor, and having the service of competent hands. But for now, he would have to make use of Price's operation. And back to the matter at hand, where the devil was Smith, right now? If he had already arrived at the pens to get his gals, then he would have seen the new telegram. The Senator had ordered his two gals caught over by the President's House to be held in separate private pens, to avoid any complications, but that had been taken care of by the local constables, being as how coffles were no longer authorized in the Federal City. This all might have been simpler four years ago, even with the northern return clause. That compromise in 1851 had not proven itself to be of any real use in getting Southern property back from up north, but it was a damned sight inconvenient when one needed to move several pieces of one's newly recovered property through the Federal City. Now, those fancies would have to be moved separately, and under cover, at considerably greater expense. Smith was supposed to be arranging that, but there was no confirmation thus far of whether the man had received his orders. For all the Senator knew, Smith might still be down in Virginia right now, or he might be up in Shrewsbury. There was just no way to tell.

"Yes, sir, Senator. Sir," the man was stammering so badly, now, he could barely make himself understood, "I, I sent him another telegram, sir, and I have a messenger waiting for his reply, right now, at the telegraph office from Mr. Smith, here in the town, but, but the telegraph office here seems to be very short handed, lately, very short handed, indeed, and-"

The Senator rounded on Loving and glared at him, growling "Do you not know Morse code, Mr. Loving?"

He saw the man's already sallow face pale further, as the absurdity of this situation must well be dawning upon the imbecile. How could he not have thought to take action, rather than waiting around to record some accounts in a useless ledger book, the fool?

"Yes, sir, Senator, I do know Morse Code," the secretary stuttered, "but-"

The Senator took a step closer, enjoying Loving's evidently growing understanding of his folly, and decided to reward the man with a smile:

"Well, Mr. Loving, then you get down there to that telegraph office, and kindly do me the honor of sending my new message to Smith, yet again, to home, to my office in the Capitol, and to the telegraph office in Shrewsbury, and when he replies, you bring me his answer immediately, so that we may end this absurdity of a situation."

"Yes, Senator-"

"Do not interrupt me."

Loving flinched as if the Senator had hit him with his cane, something which had not happened in a very long time.

"I am not done yet. While you are out there, at this molehill of a town's telegraph office, you will send a summary telegram of, and you will also post the following letter, to Price, should this

town be so lucky as to have a post office, after which, you will then visit whomever it should be in this town that knows of all of the local carriage makers and hired hacks, and you will make the necessary inquiries to find the owner of that carriage down there in what is now *my* carriage barn."

He ignored both the confused look and the relief on Loving's face as the man raised his pen, ready to take down the message. What was wrong with the man?

"Before the summer comes, Loving."

"Yes, Senator."

Loving's face had cleared, back to his usual concentration on his paper, as he touched the pen to his tongue to get the ink ready to flow. The Senator had noted how much his secretary's physical constitution tended to improve when dealing with accounts and balances, not that this improved the Senator's own state of mind. He'd been avoiding that discussion with Loving, given that he knew full well how expensive this chase had become. He'd have to look into having some more of his bills paid on extended credit from The Commonwealth, once back home. His constituents would surely be honored to find out that they were helping in the restoration of Virginia property which had been unlawfully taken across state lines. Increasing his credit lines was something else with which Loving was adept, especially when there were legal loopholes to be found that helped that noble cause.

Well, that is at least something the man does well. The Senator prided himself on knowing how to pick the right man for the right job. He cleared his throat, puffed out his chest, and then drew a breath:

"My dear Mr. Charles Price, trader, etcetera, etcetera, I am writing to you on the urgent matter of our collaboration in the recovery of our several valuable items of property which have gone missing, last seen in your new state."

He paused, walking around the desk, *his* desk, to sit down and put his feet up on the desk, then threw a glance at Loving, who was still scribbling, absorbed in concentration, and continued:

"I have strong reason to believe that your new state unwillingly harbors more than a few brazen subversives, allies of northern abolitionists who seek to rob us of our property and even to incite servile insurrection. I am certain that you will agree, of course, to the haste which we must make to ensure that these damned Yankee abolitionists are dealt with, and forcefully, both immediately, by taking such action as will definitively put an end to the activities of these local subverters of the peaceful citizens of your state, not to mention getting back your property, and over the longer term, by introducing legislation to more severely punish such thievery in the Maryland General Assembly, so that your good Governor may follow the example that Old Virginia has set in building a set of legal deterrents to such lawlessness."

The Senator paused to allow Loving to catch up, and to see if the man wished to make any suggestions, as was his wont, in the text of the letter. Hearing the pen pause, he glanced over to see his secretary watching him, and continued:

"Therefore, in addition to recommending that certain bills, copies of which my personal secretary will provide for you, are read into the appropriate committees in Annapolis, I would like

to suggest a collaboration between you and myself, in order to more quickly make good on the information to which we have recently been made privy, and effect the immediate recovery of our stolen property. Smith, my head overseer, is highly experienced at this sort of endeavor, and can take on the burden of directing this part of our enterprise, once he arrives."

The Senator declined to mention that he also intended to direct Smith to make sure that the homes of any white subversives found to be helping his fancy in absconding should not pass the winter intact. It would hardly due to give Price a chance to bring a scandal upon the Senate merely for teaching them how to do in Maryland what had already worked so well in The Commonwealth. As a matter of fact, no trader in human flesh, such as Price, was ever without his own sins, so, really, the Senator reckoned, it was only just desserts if a climber like Price took the weight of an investigation into the unfortunate accidental fire in the home of an undesirable citizen of the state of Maryland.

"I am the Honorable, etcetera, et cetera."

With this missive done, that took care of putting the second part of his plan in motion. If he could make Price do this state's own undone work of dealing with these damned Maryland abolitionists, more credit might just accrue to The Commonwealth, thanks to himself, of course, with the State House, and maybe even with the governor. Having Annapolis in his service would help his maneuverings back home, even if these border people were an inconstant lot. He would have to wait for Smith's arrival to move the last pawns into position. *Unless*… Just suppose that they hadn't gone out west. Price's boys thought they were headed that way because they found some cap lost on the ground from his gal, Weems, but what if that conniving little uppity gal was

trying to trick her master, again. She had done it before, that was now certain, being passed off as the carriage driver for a white man whom old Charlie Price supposed to have been the one trying to carry her abroad, out of the state of Maryland, when in point of fact, it was an even worse sort of robbery. These damned subversives were known to associate with those damned Yankee abolitionists up in Philadelphia, and that, by God, was where they must really be headed. How else would they steal themselves north in weather like this? Why, for a good week now, neither man nor beast had managed to get anywhere due to this damnable snow. How, then, could anyone, even a darkie, possibly imagine cutting across country, west, of all places, further into slave territory? The only thing on the other side of that Cumberland mountain pass was Ohio and Kentucky, neither of which were any real obstacle to a man who called himself a slave trader. So, old Charlie Price must be wrong. But, his dogs and his boys were here already, so how to make good use of them, in spite of the man's tomfoolery, was the question. How to get his Fancy back, before someone else got hold of her. The mere thought of her warming another man's bed made him grind his teeth with rage.

"Sir? Senator, sir?"

His personal secretary had interrupted the Senator's rather more personal thoughts.

"Loving, why are you still here," shouted, the Senator, glaring at the man who had dared to intrude upon his... ruminations.

The letter was finished, evidently. Where was his secretary's head, today? The Senator's stomach rumbled, but before he could give any further orders, Loving had babbled:

“Sir, I just wanted to know if you had dined yet, or whether I should ask M-”

“Tell that woman to send me a decent supper. You have your orders, now, have you not? Begone!”

He had wanted to return to that stimulating thought of his Ann, but as Loving was bowing himself out and closing the office door, and the man couldn’t have taken more than three steps, a knock came at his door. It couldn’t be his supper already.

"Not now, Loving."

The man must have forgotten something, with his unbalanced humors running amok, today. Having just sat back down again, another knock came at the door, merely to ask him another idiotic question, of course. The Senator pounded a fist on his desk.

“What is it, now, Loving?”

The door opened, but it wasn’t Loving who entered the office. It was his head overseer, covered from head to toe in snow.

“Smith!”

The Senator’s smile was actually genuine as Smith swept his hat from his head, careful to keep from getting snow on the desk, while the Senator hefted his bulk out of the chair and came around the desk to shake the man’s hand.

“Senator, sir.”

Smith touched his fingers to the place where his cap had just been, as though doffing his hat. The man had been drinking in a pub when a press gang came by, and thus had the Naval habit of making his respects in that way, after all these years.

“Good, Smith, good, you got my new telegram. I have needed you here urgently. I have immediate business for you. Did you bring the dogs and the boys?”

“Not all of ‘em, Sir, just those I could round up in the hour or so after I got your new orders. Scuttlebutt from Norfolk was that a bad Nor'easter was coming, maybe big enough to bring over a foot or more of snow even in the Federal City, so I thought I’d best get a move on quicker than quick, sir.”

The Senator nodded appreciatively, slapping Smith’s shoulder:

“Good man, Smith, good man. By God, if I had ten more just like you, then these damned Yankees wouldn’t stand a chance.”

The Senator was pleased to see that Smith looked as proud as a piper, glowing with pride as the man drank in his praise. *And he should, by God! Not just anyone merits my praise.* He went back around his desk, sitting his bulk back down heavily in the chair. After offering Smith a whiskey, The Senator explained what he wanted the man to do out here, how it should look like the work of Price's boys, and that Smith should report directly to him up in Shrewsbury as soon as that was done. From there, they would divide up the darkies and lie in wait for their quarry at both set traps. He dismissed Smith, who left like a man on a mission from God, which the Senator knew himself to be, as near as made any difference, especially back home in the Old Dominion. He put his feet up, and then a thought came to him.

He had dismissed Loving too soon, he realized. Calling his secretary back, he ordered:

"Loving, take a letter for Smith. These are my orders to him when he arrives in that border town to take charge of the gals that absconded," he paused, then smiled, adding, "you will give them, both of them, one hundred lashes."

"*Each*, Senator, sir?"

The Senator rolled his eyes. Why did this fool always make such a fuss over these darkies. His secretary was an efficient organizer, he had to give him credit for that much, but the man always made a mountain out of a cotton-picking molehill when it came time to discipline the darkies. The Senator sighed. It was not easy to find a counting man as reliable as Loving, and one not given to drink, so he'd just have to put up with the man's whining, for now:

“Yes, Loving, I have said,” he paused for emphasis, “each. And if they die, then their claims are to be filed from my textile mill up north.”

He turned away to look out the window for a moment, noting that it faced the damnable north. Probably why it was so cold.

“Let them make themselves useful in death, and let that damned Yankee insurance company,” turning back to the sniveling man, “Loving,” he bellowed, “what is the name of that damned company?”

“New York Life, Senator.”

Nodding in satisfaction, the Senator intoned, “Yes, New York life. Let them damned Yankees pay out for once, for all of their damned premiums I pay for these darkies in my mills up there.”

“Yes, sir.”

After all, what were they, but an old used fancy and a pickaninny fancy gal not yet even sure to live to long enough to sell, too skinny still to bed with, yet. And nothing compared to the exquisite beauty of his Ann. He would make her see reason, even if it took losing two other pieces of his property.

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Chapter 23

It had been over a week, now, since we had gotten away from that tavern by the skin of our teeth. The snow had continued to fall, as Little Tilly and I marveled at the way the stuff gave a brilliance to everything, seeming to muffle all of the usual forest sounds, and yet somehow still made the tiniest pattering sound when the flakes landed, if you listened just right. Almost like a cat's paws padding along on the window sill.

That first night in our shelter, the odd contraption that Anna fashioned from her twine and sticks had rendered it's fruits, and we learned that her *snare*, as she called it, could bring us small animals on a regular basis, which we could actually eat. We dug a very deep hole in the center of our little shelter, with the three of us having to sit on top of each other in order to make the space, and built a tiny fire, that first morning. Anna taught us how to skin, clean, and roast our catch, burying everything in our deep little fire pit as soon as we had consumed it, in the greatest haste, of course, and packing it down for the next fire after we had melted some of our snow, saved most especially to brew tea. We were as grateful as our horses for that sugar cone I had decided to take along with the tea. We even saved our tea leaves, to make a game of reading them later. For Little Tilly's sake, the futures in those leaves must be happy ones for all of us, no matter what reality might hold in store for us.

As Anna and I had discussed, our ruse was no longer viable, and we needed to go our separate ways, at least for the time being. Since the procedure of the friends with whom we had planned our escape was to give as little information as possible about their network, to avoid endangering others, only Anna knew what our destination had been before we were waylaid by that

woman at the tavern. My woeful ignorance of the local geography must now be remedied, and quickly, for Anna wanted to depart while the falling snow could still muffle her travel and cover her tracks. She assured us that this shelter would likely be as good a spot as any to rest for a time, given the even greater danger of venturing out in to woods where every available white man would certainly be looking for us. They would continue to search for us most energetically, especially in the area of the tavern, but also out along every road and path in the entire region, since they knew us to be on horseback. Anna reminded us that her attempt to throw our pursuers off, by leaving her driver's cap in the other direction, could not be counted on to have worked, or at least certainly not for very long.

Anna had already taught me, when we first left the Federal City, how to find my way by the sun, and even by the North Star, so I knew, as our bright young Tilly also knew already, how to find North by day or by night. Tilly had been a *yard hand* for a short while, so she also knew how to give a rough estimate of distances, having been tasked with delivering messages out to the fields from the great house where she had lived. These things gave us all a bit of hope that we could accomplish this new task set before us. But exactly what that task was, now, I was not certain. Anna would only tell us that she planned to make her way to the nearest safe location in which she might be able to make contact with another Conductor. In that way, with luck, she might establish contact with someone in the network up here, who then might be able to smooth our way along the route North, but there was really no way to know what would happen, so we agreed that it was best if Tilly and I waited a week, and then struck out on our own way north, heading by night along the back roads, working our way east, to meet up in Philadelphia.

“From the direction that our tracks and my old driver’s cap led, they should,” she had paused, as if thinking out loud, then continued, “hopefully, they ought to have thought, maybe, that we were heading out west, toward the Cumberland Gap. That way would be Ohio, even if it’s a weak chance.”

I was not encouraged by those words: “What do you mean, a weak chance?”

“Well, it’s a hard way to ride, through those mountains, and I also hear tell that even if Ohio is a free state, it is still not very friendly, for our kind.”

“So, do you think they will still be searching in this area?”

“I doubt it, not after an entire week, I don’t think. I suppose they are most likely to think that we have moved on up halfway through Pennsylvania by this time.”

My eyes lit up: “So, we are in Pennsylvania, now?”

Tilly and I lifted our eyes eagerly to that beautiful face, watching Anna’s lips as they formed the words we most wanted to hear:

“Yes, ma’am, I believe that we are indeed in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.”

She then shot out both arms to clamp her hands over each of our mouths, capturing the shouts of jubilation that nearly escaped from the mouths of Tilly and myself, elated to finally have left the soil of Dixie behind us.

"Shhh! Don't start counting, yet, you two, because these chickens don't hatch until we cross that Canadian border, up there. And I promise you that you are likely to see far more snow before that happens."

For some reason, a sense of foreboding overtook me, for it did not seem that Anna had spoken those words as if they augured good things to come. Why this might have been, I could not tell. We had waited as long as we could to tell Tilly the bad news, as both Anna and I dreaded having to part, but having to tell our young charge about this was almost worse than our impending separation, itself.

After Anna had given me precise instructions about how to make my way eastward and North with young Tilly, how to handle passersby, how to make Old Mary do her lying down flat trick, and how to spot a location which might be the meeting place for a Conductor, I knew it was time to bid my Beloved farewell, at least for a while.

"I will find you, up in Philadelphia, both of you. I will find the two of you, and then we will continue on, all the way up north, together. This I promise you, my Dear Willow."

I was trying to hide my own sadness, putting on my bravest face, for her sake, when a silly thought hit me:

"Too bad we couldn't climb one of these tall trees," I mused, "and just hide out up there."

Anna had shaken her head immediately:

"No, Willow, that would not be a good idea. Even if either of you could climb high enough to stay out of sight, the dogs would catch your scent right away, and being treed is not a good thing, not a good thing at all. You have no where to go, and they'd just send a man up there to get you."

Then she frowned, a grim look that I had no recollection of ever seeing on her lovely face, and I hoped never to have to see again:

"Either that, or shoot you and let you fall, either clap you in irons or let the dogs take you."

Tilly and I both recoiled in horror at the thought of such a fate being meted out to anyone. But if Anna would mention such atrocities in Tilly's hearing, it must be because it was so. Some monsters in the guise of men must truly have done such monstrous things, and we must beware, for those from whom we fled were indeed of the worst sort. I already knew that the Senator was one such. Even worse than a wolf in sheep's clothing. That man was a monster, merely disguised as a man. We could not fall into his hands.

I carefully went over all that Anna had told me, making sure to get her to confirm that I had it all right. Little Tilly's life was in my hands, and I must not falter. When it was time for Anna to depart, she gave us each one of her warmest hugs, smiling to reassure us both that we three would

soon be reunited. She had gotten up, showed us how she had woven the saplings together with twigs and bark, commenting that river birch or willow bark was best, and opened up a gap just large enough to lead Captain out of our shelter, followed by Old Mary, taking care to keep her directly in the hoof prints of Captain, anxious to disguise our presence there. That marvelous snowy landscape did give us some small consolation, as we said our final goodbyes, and then led Old Mary back in to our shelter, settling back down as Anna patched up the wall and packed something, likely snow, into the gaps to hide us from casual glances. Not that it seemed possible, let alone likely, that any human soul would venture out in this storm.

By that second or third day, I had lost track, already, it seemed to be snowing harder than ever. As if the good Lord Himself had opened the floodgates of heaven, and commanded it to become just cold enough to snow, for a good long while. Long enough for young Tilly and myself to wait an entire week longer, eating small roasted animals, since we now knew how to capture, clean and cook them, thanks to Anna's lessons. We also nibbled on that dwindling cone of sugar, as Old Mary waited patiently. Every other day we led her out to stretch her legs, relieved to see that Anna and Captain's tracks were well covered up, as she had hoped. Anna had told us that there would be just enough hay, rationed out to last until we were to leave our hiding place. When that happened, little Tilly and I knew that it was time for us to leave, as well. There was not much left to pack, and what little we did have, we always kept packed up as well as possible, a habit learned quickly by those who must be ready to flee at a moment's notice. I wondered, in spite of our cramped hiding place, if we would miss our little hole in the woods, some day. As we prepared to leave, to my surprise, young Tilly tugged at my sleeve. We had long since unpinned, shucked me out of, and folded up Adeleide's nice dress, which I had been wearing when we arrived at that ill-starred tavern. She handed me a pine cone to stash in my pocket, so that we would have dry kindling for our next fire. Then she asked:

“Miss Willow?”

I smiled down at our lovable little charge, who looked so vulnerable at that moment.

“Yes, Miss Tilly?”

I squinched up my face as I responded, tilting my head to the side. That got the giggle I had hoped for. I was glad to see that this little girl was not fully grown up too soon, in spite of the troubles which we had traversed, and those many more which we had yet, no doubt, to overcome. She looked up at me, her face wrinkled in what could only be some sad thought, her giggle already forgotten:

“Miss Anna said that the longer we stayed here, the safer we would be, right?”

“Well, in a way, yes, Tilly, I suppose so. The longer we are here, the less likely it is that they will keep searching in this immediate area for us, or at least until things get back to normal, weather-wise, at any rate. Why do you ask?”

She looked at me in a thoughtful sort of way, as if measuring something, and then looked at Old Mary, who was slowly finishing that last ration of hay we had given her, before looking back up at me, to say:

“Do you think we could stay for an extra day or two, just to be safe? I have gone for days without eating, and I bet you have, too, Miss Willow.”

I put my arms out to her, and she crawled the short distance to accept what I hoped would be a reassuring hug. I had to explain to her in some way that would help her get back that mischievous sense of adventure she had had when we first met. I feared that I was not nearly as gifted as my dear Anna at such things, but I had to try. I patted down the hair on the top of her head, tilted her face up to look at me, and began to explain:

"Old Mary, here, must eat, and she also needs to be up and walking around. You and I can hold out a bit longer, that is true, but we must be strong, for her. She is an innocent animal, and must not be made to suffer more than necessary for our troubles, don't you think?"

Little Tilly nodded her head, and I could see the effort that she was making to be brave, for all three of us. How could I not, then, be brave myself, and lead us up and out of this narrow place? I summoned all of my energy and my courage, borrowing just a little bit from the good memories I had of my dear and much missed Anna, and gave young Tilly a pat on the shoulder, coaxing her:

"Come, little one. The One who watches over the lilies of the field, and feeds the birds of the air their daily bread, He will not let us come to harm. We must be strong, and of good courage, for …" then she joined me, "the Lord is with us."

I held my hand out to catch some of the falling snow through the central opening of our sapling shelter, and held it out for Tilly to look at, as it melted in my palm:

"Our troubles will do this, too, one day, Tilly. We must believe that. And also," I tried to imitate our Anna's mischievous grin, without much success, but continued, "we must hurry to beat

the remainder of this snow to the finish line. If we can get out of here before it finishes snowing, the last bits of that big old storm might just cover our tracks, and maybe even carry us up North!"

Tilly clasped my hand as we both fell to giggling, and then a sight stopped me short, throwing my finger to my lips. Old Mary's ears had pricked up, apparently listening to a sound that ours could not yet pick up. We both flattened closer to the ground, breathing in the smells of pine needles, unwashed saddle blankets, Old Mary's feed bucket, and our fear. As we listened, long minutes seemed to turn into hours as Tilly and I heard nothing, but Old Mary's ears swiveled around, very slowly, apparently following the sounds of something which she found to be threatening, for I had seen that look in her horse eyes before, her body trembling, ears nearly clamped to her head: when a bear was nearby. Now, however, there seemed to be nothing. How she could hear anything was beyond me, but she was clearly listening to something that troubled her. And anything that troubled Old Mary also troubled me.

We stayed still, as if we had been out in the open rather than covered by our shelter. As we watched Old Mary, we looked at each other, the confusion plain on young Tilly's face. She also could not hear anything, but I wondered how much this snow might be able to mask the sounds of approaching feet. Of the three of us, Old Mary here would likely be most familiar with that particular sound, which I had only heard very few times in my life, as I supposed to be the case for young Tilly, as well. I also knew that we would do well to heed the special training that Old Mary had been given, as I had already seen back in Maryland, when I hit my head on that rock as I fell off of Old Mary, through, of course, absolutely no fault of her own.

So, we lay flat, and listened as if our very lives depended on it, which they probably did. At last, we were rewarded with the sounds of some odd thing, growing more audible minute by agonizing minute. Finally, we were able to hear a soft crunching sound, repeated as if it were the sound of a man's footsteps. A heavy grunt confirmed that some man, likely a large man, had stopped not far from our hiding place.

I held my breath as I heard a voice join itself to that grunt:

"Well, I'll be. Never seen a thicket of trees quite like this before. Have to come back by after spring and cut back some of these, or we'll get some wildfires for sure. Them old owners sure must have been short handed."

So, this man was walking the boundaries of his new property, and just when we had been about to leave. Little Tilly's wish to stay in hiding had been more prophetic that we knew, for had we departed just when we had intended, we would have stumbled right into this man. Who knew what might have happened then? I sent up a prayer of thanks to the Good Lord, who finally seemed to be starting to look out for us.

***

Chapter 24

"What do you think?"

We exchanged a startled look, having each whispered that question at the same time. Then we both let out a quiet giggle, and rose up together.

We had waited until well past the time that our feebler human ears could make out the departing footsteps of that man, crunching through the snow. Old Mary had finally seemed to relax, breathing over me again in her odd way, as I had grown so used to her doing back on the way up to Dr. H.'s house, before we had met Tilly. I feared more for the safety of this child than for that of either Anna or myself. I felt the weight of responsibility for her fate rest heavy upon my shoulders. Whether we were now up North or not, in Pennsylvania or not, I knew that time, and the law, were against us.

I felt my stomach cramp, and I began to taste bile, as I recalled the glee with which the Senator had recounted his success in Congress, getting them to pass a detestable law which even we who were held in bondage were told about, and in no uncertain terms: any friends we might have had up North were now hogtied. This law bound them to act, will they or nil they, in the service of any and all slave catchers, even in those free states to which we might manage to flee our own harsh *condition of servitude*, as the law liked to put it. Even a white gentleman, like Dr. H., could be forced to aid in our capture. Thus, I reminded myself to rest assured that even if this white man,

even in Pennsylvania, had a mind to help us, Tilly and I must be careful to keep well out of his sight. We could only bring harm to him, and to the rest of his family.

After agreeing that the man was gone, I opened a tiny gap on one side of our shelter, and peeked out, while Tilly did the same on the opposite side. She nodded to me as solemnly as an adult:

"All looks to be clear, Miss Willow."

I smiled, and nodded. We proceeded to follow Anna's instructions for leaving our little shelter, right down to the letter:

"The nearest town around here," she had told me, "is Shrewsbury."

I, of course, had never heard of it, so I had nodded to show her that I was paying attention, and kept my questions to myself, for that moment.

"It is the closest border town to the part of Maryland we came up from, so that is likely to be the first place they look. Try your hardest to avoid it."

How, I wondered, would we do that. She had answered my second unspoken question in tolerable detail, not too long to remember, but sparing no important points. My question about the shrew would have to wait a while.

We carefully enlarged the exit in our shelter, led Old Mary out to stretch her legs, and then stood back a ways to admire Anna's handiwork.

"We really *did* look like part of the trees," young Tilly had observed in a whisper, and I nodded my agreement, giving her shoulder a pat as I headed back in through the new doorway. It was true. Our little shelter really did look like a stand of fallen trees, the way she had littered it about with dead branches and bark. We worked to bury all signs of our presence and then looked back, almost nostalgic, for a moment before starting on our way. We didn't have time to risk standing around, even to thank these young trees, for more than a minute or two. Time was now of the essence. We tried our best to leave it all appearing just as we imagined it must have looked to the man earlier in the day, so as not to betray our having been there to friend or foe.

We led Old Mary on foot right through the deep tracks of the man who had spied our shelter, hoping to disguise our own tracks, at least a little bit. I was amazed at the light snow that continued to fall, after an entire week. We had packed down all the snow we could carry with us, and bundled up kindling and dry branches in our saddlebags, taking the place of all the food we had eaten. For now, it was to be a hungry day, at least for Tilly and myself. I hoped that Old Mary would know how to break through this snow to find grass for herself to eat. Anna had pointedly suggested that I only tell Tilly that we were headed to the next state north. That way, if we were separated or caught, the child could truthfully say that she knew nothing of our plans. I hated to hide anything from Tilly, but I trusted Anna's wider knowledge of the situation.

We walked as lightly as we could, Tilly and I taking turns, one walking backward to brush out our tracks, as Anna had instructed, while the other crept ahead, leading Old Mary. This helped

us all get used to walking again after so much time spent cramped together mostly lying down. Anna had pointed in the direction that we were to go when leaving our little copse of trees, so that I would not have to waste time finding North and then orienting myself east. We should run into a back country road about a mile past a boundary marker. That much I was allowed to tell Tilly, which I had done before we left, so that she could help me mark the distance and prevent us from getting lost at this crucial point in our journey. We were so close to the border with the state of Maryland that almost any error in navigation would put us back south of the Mason-Dixon line, and in even greater danger than we were already. In Pennsylvania, there seemed to be procedures that our pursuers would have to follow before they could have us removed from this Commonwealth. So it was of the utmost importance that we not be spotted by anyone at all until we had, at the very least, reached the relative safety of a larger town or city, where there would be constables and judges to provide us with at least some slight protection, should we be found by the men whom the law judged to be our owners.

"Is this the road?"

Little Tilly seemed to have read my mind. Anna had said there was only one real road in the area that ran east and west. It seemed big enough. I looked at young Tilly, through the gathering gloom, raising my hands in a question. She responded with a lopsided grin. *I guess that's a Yes.* Tilly then pointed to Old Mary's head, making motions that imitated pulling off her riding harness and the bit, which Anna had explained to me did not stop a horse from eating, but did make it unpleasant. Young Tilly evidently wished to make it easier for Old Mary to graze while we stopped to check the road. I nodded yes, glad that one of us had thought of that little kindness.

We stayed hidden as best we could at the side of the road for a moment or two, Old Mary chomping away while Tilly and I got as good a look in both directions as we could, looking for travelers, and also checking for homes or taverns close enough to see us coming onto the road from the woods. A run-in like the one that we had already had could end up fatal for all three of us. Anna must surely still be in this state, and those who wanted us back would just as surely find that out from me, will I or nil I, if caught here.

It seemed as safe as it was ever going to be. We agreed that east was in the direction that we both pointed to, first hiding our hands in our coats before revealing them, as if it were a game in which we would both lose should our fingers point in different directions, but both of us would win if, and only if, we turned out to be pointing in the same direction. We won our game. I hated to interrupt Old Mary's meal, but it was time to go.

Tilly and I took either side of Old Mary, and climbed up onto the road with as much stealth as we could muster. We walked with our heads down and entirely covered, trying to fit the look of two locals hurrying home with dry wood after visiting a sick friend. We knew that our story would not keep, but it was all we could think of as we had packed our saddlebags in that cramped little shelter. We'd need to devise a better story after we managed to get some food into our bellies, even if no more than a few roasted chestnuts. Anna had told me that under the direst of circumstances, even crickets, after the wings and legs were torn off, could serve as emergency food, but I dearly hoped not to have to try such a desperate meal. Besides, where would we find any crickets at this time of year? With a bit of luck we would go unseen, no one wanting to be out after dark in this weather, and in a couple of hours we could ride Old Mary at least a little faster than we could go on foot.

We passed one tavern, drinkers coming and going, and none seemed to look our way. I was surprised to catch sight of what looked like Christmas decorations. We'd been in hiding for so long that I had lost track of the season. Personally, I had never had good associations with the holidays, for the Senator always came back to Virginia for the long break. I hoped Tilly might have some good memories of at least this time of year, when most hands would have had a bit of time for themselves, given the cold weather. This was a more dangerous time, however, for any who must pass under the demanding eyes of the mistress or master of the Great house.

We had to walk quickly and in silence, so this was not the time to ask after young Tilly's thoughts, but I hoped to learn more about her, before all of this was over. In the meantime, I would have to think of some sort of way to make our flight more of an adventure, as Anna had done, for our little Tilly. And a gift. I must find some way to procure a Christmas present for my young friend, even if I had to weave some sort of toy for her out of twine and twigs, and add my embroidery threads to give it some softness and color. She was still a child, after all, and no child should go without love, and if possible gifts, too, during this season. I vowed to do my best to give her that as soon as I could.

We mounted Old Mary about an hour past that tavern, and she seemed content enough to pick up a slow trot. As the night wore on, she slowed of her own accord down to a walk. We dared not stop to rest. Time was of the essence on this road even more than it had been as we made our way through the woods. It was here that we were more liable to be stopped and questioned, as any passing white person had the right to do, and we had no good answers to give them. We did still have our precious packet of papers, and a bit of money. Tilly had cleverly bundled them up on her

person inside the blanket she had used to wear as a coat when we left that unwholesome woman's tavern.

Unfortunately, those papers currently did us little good, as none of us knew how to read all of them. Anna and even young Tilly could sound out a few words, and I could recognize a few more words that we knew, but none of us was yet able to get the sense of the entirety of any of the several documents which we carried upon us. Those documents now lay hidden in one of Old Mary's saddlebags. Anna had reasoned that I'd have the best chance of being able to use them, passing for White and claiming Tilly as my servant, since I indeed had some paper with Tilly's name upon it. The trouble was, I could not tell what that paper actually said. Nevertheless, since so many white workers were also unable to read, it should still be possible to use those documents as a gambler used his cards, even when lacking an Ace. I might be able to bluff our way out of difficulty, if I learned to play my hand well enough.

As I thought on this need to continue learning my letters, Old Mary pricked up her ears. Little Tilly was lolling in the saddle, her head resting against my chest and her hands wrapped around the pommel, while I held the reins. Although the snow had stopped falling, I saw nothing, and heard nothing. I urged Old Mary into a faster walk. Soon enough, I could make out a person walking toward us. It was late, so I feared that no good could come of any meeting with this person, and urged Old Mary into a trot, when the traveler, a man entirely covered by his coat, gloves, and wide brimmed hat, called out to me.

"Go back, missus, go on back, please."

Against my better judgment, but too curious, and feeling that Old Mary was too tired, to run, I let her slow back to a walk as I held Tilly more tightly.

"What is the matter, sir?"

"Oh, Miss, you don't need to be calling me sir."

If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn that the man sounded like a fellow fugitive, which he confirmed.

"I's just a freedman been living up here the las' few years, now 'bout to pick up and go again."

I felt sorry for this man, who seemed to have only just heard about this dastardly law, four years old, now, that put his hard won freedom in jeopardy. But I also recalled Anna's warning not to trust even our fellow Colored folk, and pulled Old Mary farther to the opposite side of the road, to be sure that this man could not grab hold of her reins as he drew nearer.

"I am sorry to hear that," as I nodded. I hoped that he managed to keep his freedom, and I added, "very sorry."

I had been about to urge Old Mary into a trot, when he called again:

“Missus, you don’t want that young’un seeing what they’s doin’ up this here road up Shrewsbury way.”

Shrewsbury, the town we were meant to avoid? But how were we to avoid it, if we had to pass right through it on our way east? Maybe this was why Anna had taken such pains to impress the importance of speed and stealth upon me. She must have wanted us to pass by this town too quickly to notice that it was so near, but why?

“I thank you kindly, but we must keep going, and this is the only way that we can go.”

He tipped his hat to us, and we each continued on our way. I wondered what he could have meant by his warning, but I had no time to think on it, for the snow had stopped falling, and Old Mary was clearly also getting too tired to continue. She had slowed down so much that Tilly and I could likely have walked faster. We would need to camp out of sight of the road for at least one or two nights before joining the main road North. Then, we would need a better plan. As I looked for a place to leave the road so that we could find a sheltered hiding spot to rest, I could just make out some sort of a hubub going on further up.

As we drew closer, it seemed that a building must be on fire, such was the commotion and the noise, not to mention the flames. I urged Old Mary forward faster, not daring to believe it possible for us to find a safe spot to camp so close to all of this agitation. As we finally came close enough to see what was going on, it turned out that there were two people stretched out, arms tied to posts, and a great number of men were milling about, including what appeared to be constables.

Several men appearing to be arguing energetically with each other. Then I saw her, first her back, bloody and skin hanging in ribbons, and then her face.

It was the face of my Miss Mary.

And tied next to her, was little Sal.

***

Chapter 25

We had both seen, it, young Tilly and I, of that much I was certain.

"Don't look."

Even though I used one hand to cover the eyes of little Tilly, I could tell that the child had seen the horror. I urged Old Mary into a trot, hoping to pass by the whipping post unseen and unseeing, but I knew I had failed, by the way both of our hearts stopped. That had indeed been my poor Miss Mary, up there, blood dripping from her ragged back. And that was my dear little Sal, bound in like manner, standing spread eagle fashion, as if being crucified on an invisible cross, right next to her. They had apparently been whipping on Miss Mary for some time.

Long enough to have left nothing but ribbons of flesh hanging from her back, torn nearly down to the bone, and visible by the light of that bonfire, even at this time of night. The constables had evidently refused to take part in the terrible spectacle, never ceasing to rain curses down upon the two men who clearly felt it necessary to exercise the master's right of ownership over my dear friends, by publicly flogging them in punishment for their, or our, attempt to flee the cruelty of that master, and his hired men. That I only saw two of them, head overseer Smith, and that other unwholesome lackey of his who so often seemed to take such pleasure in being the hand that wielded the whip, only increased my dread. I knew full well that there were many more men, and dogs, somewhere, at Smith's beck and call. In spite of the terrible damage already done to her murdered flesh, I heard Smith's hideous voice ring out a word:

“Again!”

Only a second seemed to pass before the awful sound of leather striking flesh was heard even over the outraged shouts of the northern men. There followed a low moan, one that could only have come from my poor Miss Mary, and the sound of something hitting the wooden floor of the building. I had not remarked whether it was a tavern, or a home, or even a barn, but it was a large enough structure to have had a wide front porch with columns and stairs leading up to the front doors.

And then, an even worse order followed that one:

“This one is done, she got no more for us. Move on over to the little one, here.”

The heart rending high pitched shriek of fear from a small girl pierced the night sky, in the voice I knew so well: that of my tiny little Sally. Before I could stop myself, I had turned sideways in the saddle. We were just opposite the road from that horrific scene. To my grave chagrin, and possibly to our undoing, my eyes met not those of my poor Miss Mary, but of that odious man, Smith.

In the instant that our eyes met, I knew that he had recognized me. My ears did not tarry in confirming that thought, for the horrid beast of a man, as head overseer, lost no time in calling out to his hirelings. I heard the well remembered voices of two of his most loathed fellow overseers from back down in Virginia.

Although I was the Senator's personal prized property, and therefore one of the very few Colored women out of his reach, Smith missed no opportunity, when the Senator was not in earshot, of making lurid suggestions, to be sure that I knew of his lecherous disposition toward me. If I had not been the closely guarded favorite of a more powerful man, I would have been at the mercy of this predator, just as it seemed that my two unfortunate friends were now. Those thoughts, and the shrill cries of my poor little Sal, moved me to a depth of disgust and fear that I was unable to contain.

I heard my words before I knew they had escaped my lips:

"Smith! Stop, you foul creature, stop it!"

As I heard those words tear themselves from my throat, I knew that I had blundered, and blundered very badly, indeed. I saw the look of triumph in the eyes of that loathsome hunter of men, as Smith practically jumped for joy, clearly delighted at having found me, and with another young fugitive, to boot. Even in the darkness of night, I could see that smile of malice. It was the one he wore when he was about to torment one of my fellow bondsmen. This time, that smile was aimed squarely at me.

He had leapt down from the stairs two at a time in his haste to get to me, shouting as he advanced upon us:

"I got you now, you little Fancy whore!"

Then, turning to look back at his two foul helpers, still holding Miss Mary and Little Sal, he cried out:

"Come on, boys, leave them two, they ain't going no where. Come on down here and help me catch this prize!"

As I heard those words, I felt young Tilly stiffen against my chest, even as Old Mary, unbidden, had already begun to surge forward into a full out gallop, her body starting to flatten out as her hooves tore great chunks out of the earth. I was infinitely grateful, once again, for her excellent training, and leaned forward protectively over Tilly as we both stretched across that long neck, both our pairs of feet digging hard into Old Mary's flanks. And it had not been a moment too soon, for I saw at least one man running to get us, grabbing for Old Mary's reins, everything a great confusion of shouting and stamping.

I feared every last man there, for I knew that even without proof, every man here was bound by law to render all aid to that horrible man, Smith, at considerable risk to themselves, should they refuse. Their only recourse was if they had verified proof that Tilly and I were not fugitives, which of course, did not exist, for fugitives we certainly were. And now, if it were not for having Old Mary here with us, we would already be back in our bonds. I vowed, as we rode down the feint-hearted attempts of several pairs of hands seeking to stop our flight, that I would not let that happen. Neither of us here, neither young Tilly, nor myself, would be sent back into bondage. That, I would find a way to prevent, at all costs.

As Old Mary move faster than I could have imagined her capable, I had only the time to remind myself that our best hope of staying out of chains, and off of the auction block, was to let

Old Mary lead the way. I could spare no thoughts for my poor friends, Miss Mary, and little Sal. There was nothing at all that I could do for them right now.

I willed myself to focus on keeping Tilly and myself in the saddle. It was a good thing, too. As Old Mary cleared the last of the hands that sought to seize us, she then abruptly did something I had not expected: she wheeled to one side and bolted off again, making for the woods.

Some part of my mind recalled that this was the north side of the road. I knew this because I had looked up, wistfully, numerous times as we had walked along that road, wondering why we could not simply go due North, rather than following this hazardous road east. As we charged into those woods, finally headed in the direction that I had wanted to go all along, my mind could only register bewilderment. I knew that this very special horse had all sorts of marvelous training, but for the life of me, I could not fathom what had just happened. We seemed to have been saved from capture specifically by her training, exactly to that purpose. How that could be possible, and where we were headed next, I had no way of knowing. Tilly and I had both let entirely go of the reins, each of us holding on to the pommel and to Old Mary's mane for dear life, as she crashed willy nilly through woods that only she could see. But she fled, on our behalf, from sounds that all three of us could still hear. The last human sounds I could make out were music to my ears. I heard a great confusion of shouts and cursing, including what sounded like those blessed constables objecting to the use of Smith's dogs, brought up from Virginia.

"... I must remind you that the use of those dogs in this manner is illegal here in the Commonwealth of PA, and that you are to …"

The intelligible parts of the man's voice died out as we sped away, putting more distance between ourselves and the hubub, but I could still make out the words of that two legged animal, Smith, as he threw curses at the head Constable:

"...only one man ... are you blind? I need -"

And then, I could clearly make out, in a still louder shout, as if, in his righteous anger, that Pennsylvania constable were trying to open the heavens:

"... will remove these animals at once, or my men will shoot them…"

So, it seemed that we were to enjoy just a little bit of protection from these Northern men, here in the blessed Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, after all. Those words were the last I could make out, as we fled, finally headed North, though exactly where, I still could not see. I was about to thank the heavens above for both the legalistic wrath of the constable, and for this marvelous horse, when the pommel rose up, striking me in the neck. I half choked, instinctively letting go of the pommel and Old Mary's mane as my hands flew up to protect my throat.

Young Tilly must have taken that same pommel strike somewhere lower down, perhaps in her chest, for she, too, had let go. The child listed to one side, while I tilted in the other direction, scrabbling for a hold on anything. My fingers closed on thin air. I felt myself falling as if time had suddenly decided to move at half of its normal speed, and I realized two things. First, that I must not make a sound, and second, that I had fallen off of Old Mary. Young Tilly also fell off, from the opposite side. I landed in a patch of bushes, rolling just a bit, as Anna had said one must when one falls from a horse. I could almost hear her warning:

"every rider will come off of a horse at some time or other, so you must certainly know how to fall."

I was glad of that lesson, now, for I seemed to have done myself no harm, when I fell off of Old Mary this time. Apart from a few bruises, perhaps, nothing seemed to be damaged, and no lightening bugs arrived to greet my lifted head. I sat up, looking first for any men who might have been pursuing us. Strangely enough, there seemed to be no one in the immediate area of my fall. I could still just make out the fire, and hear some of the ruckus going on, back where Smith had tried to lay hands on us, but no one appeared to have followed us. At least, not yet, for there most assuredly would be pursuit.

Smith and his hired beasts would undoubtedly force some Northern men, in accordance with this new law, to help in his task of finding and capturing us. Find us, he now had accomplished. Capturing us again, we might still avoid, if we were careful. There would no doubt also be other men who hunted fugitives like us hoping to get the reward money for themselves. I therefore made it my first priority to find young Tilly, and then to find Old Mary, who was still carrying our precious documents in those saddlebags. Not to mention enough money that had been given to us by Dr. H. so that we might be able to rent a room in some inn or family home, if I could play my role well enough. First, I looked around as far as my limited sight would allow me, and spied a clump of bushes tall enough to hide me fairly well. There seemed to be no snow here, for some reason. I headed for the brush, crouching as low as I could, hoping that this would be a good enough hiding spot until I could think of a plan.

I was counting on those good Pennsylvania constables to continue in their objections, and thus prevent Smith from coming to look for us with his dogs. First, I had to find Tilly. I went back over what I knew thus far. I had seen her head, and even felt, somehow, as I was falling out of that saddle, as if Old Mary had made a sharp turn to our left, hopefully not trampling poor little Tilly in the process. The next thing I needed to do was to find Old Mary. Tilly should have done the same thing that I had done, if Anna's instructions were any guide. We were always to roll a little bit, find a safe hiding spot, and look about from there, to decide what to do next.

The problem was that young Tilly seemed to have taken more of the impact from the pommel when Old Mary must have jumped over some obstacle in our path. Neither of us had been able to see much, so Tilly might be lying somewhere injured right now. In this case, she was in grave danger, and even more so if she was exposed. Would Old Mary pull that same trick from back when I fell off of her, and was injured? Could the horse put that particular training into practice without Anna here to make those odd bird calls she had made back then?

Then, an even worse problem came to mind. As I lay on the ground, only just having fallen out of the saddle, I could have sworn that, rather than stopping to lie down with young Tilly, as she had with me when I fell, I thought that I had heard Old Mary keep going. That thought was extremely troubling, but I hoped that I could take some small comfort in knowing that no dogs would be coming after us, at least for the moment. How long those Pennsylvania constables would be able to keep Smith and his cronies from using their dogs in spite of the local law, who could say? I knew that I would never trust those overseers to abide by the laws of any locality north of Virginia, maybe not even those of Canada. I had already seen what such ruthless men would do, and I had no wish to wait around long enough to find out what new schemes they would come up

with to get around these Pennsylvania men. My head was aching so much that I had trouble keeping my thoughts in order.

What to do?

I must figure out where I was, orient myself so that I could make a plan, and begin my search for little Tilly. I must also quickly attend to any wounds she might have, hoping she could not have fallen too very far from where I fell. Then, I must find Old Mary, for she still carried many items that would be of great help to us. And, finally, I must make a plan to get us back to our original route, on the way east, as I had promised Anna.

So, where to start? First, by not giving in to this rising nausea, and above all, by not fainting.

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Chapter 26

He could not believe his ears:

“They got away?”

“Yes, Senator. I’m very sorr-”

“What do you mean, they got away, Smith? How in the blazes of every circle of northern hell did those boys manage to let my Fancy get away? Tell me, I pray you, how?”

“Well, Senator, I only had a couple of my boys, and them constables, them damned Pennsylvania constables, they insisted, you see, -”

“No, Smith, I do not see.”

He waited for an explanation.

“Senator, they said that we could not pursue any persons who did not appear to be persons of color without definite proof before the magistrate, Sir, and-”

“Damn them, but why did you not at least stop her, tell the damned constables she stole my money, something, any thing to keep her in your custody, or their custody, or someone’s damned custody!”

“Sir, I didn’t have even close to enough of my boys up there with me to comb them woods up there, and they let the horse take off and split up and disappeared into them-“

“In the snow, Smith, they disappeared into the got damned snow? A blind child can track someone running in the snow!”

“Well, you see, Senator, it had been cleared already, the road, and all that back area had been so trampled down by so many feet already, there weren’t no tracks to follow-”

The Senator held up his hand, not wanting to risk holding up his cane and hitting the only competent man in his service.

“Listen to me, Smith. You go back there, and you get some more boys to help you. Get some of those local boys. Deputize some of the damned Yankees up there, then!”

This was Smith’s first time leading the boys up north, but he ought to have known this, damn his hide. Why was his best man staring at him like a dumb darkie?

“I can do that, sir?”

“Yes, by God, you can, Smith, and you damned surely will, too!”

He fixed Smith with a glare that made even his head overseer flinch. Satisfied that he had made his point, he deigned to explain what the fool ought to have already known.

“We will make sure that these damned Yankees remember that the law applies equally to them, as well as to us. Some, in the Federal City, are taking delight in running up my expenses, reminding me that I cannot move my own property in the way in which I see fit to have them transported. Remind them, then, that they are also law bound to return my property to me, no matter how far north those fancies run.” He thumped his cane on the floor. “I don’t care if we have to chase them up to the border of British Canada, those northern bastards will help me get my property back, or I will see every damned Yankee coward filling the jails from here to Boston!”

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Chapter 27

I finally had what I hoped was a workable plan. I knew that I did not dispose of much time, here in the dark. I also knew that I hadn't the slightest room for error. Moving without care was liable to give away not only my own hiding place, but maybe even that of poor young Tilly, too. I edged my head up, scanning for movement, straining my ears for every sound. I could still just make out noises which indicated one crucial thing. Smith and his lackeys were still being held up by the good men of Pennsylvania. But the fact that I could hear them meant that they were dangerously close.

And for the moment, all was entirely silent. Not even the crickets were chirping. Of course. It was too cold for crickets. Empty-bellied as we were, Tilly, especially, would not be able to hold out long. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, the breeze helped me by moving the moon out from under the cloud cover. I was in a fairly wooded area, with many thickets all about me. Perhaps this was what Old Mary had been trained to run toward, when fleeing. I spied a likely seeming thicket of small trees, tolerably close to me. I could scuttle along, low to the ground, from here to there. As long as no local area dogs took it into their minds to make the rounds here, it might work.

I took a deep breath and crouched low. My tired legs were already starting to cramp. I had to stop several times to catch my breath, watching for prying eyes. It seemed to take an eternity, but I finally reached my intended destination. It seemed like the kind of spot where Anna would have chosen to hide, and that gave me some comfort. Once again, I scanned the area, seeking signs of young Tilly or of Old Mary. Not even a field mouse seemed to be stirring. Why? Had all of the racket, or maybe the fire, driven away the creatures that usually hung about at this time of night?

Then something else occurred to me. I had seen no one working to put out the fire. Had the cut-throats from Virginia managed to set alight an abandoned building? Even then it would be a hazard to the surrounding buildings. *Unless...* Just then a terrible memory came to me. It was another of his *victories* the Senator had boasted about, for which he never missed an opportunity.

The Senator was not above using an *insurance* payout, something he had threatened, when I had run before. To cover the loan on a property he wished to purchase or, to order some kind of work done and then claim that he had improved it. Or on a dead slave. I often tried to keep him talking, using his vanity to keep his attentions away from my own person. The distraction never worked for very long, but I had gleaned what might now be an important piece of information. The means of extracting such a pay out from his insurance claims, as he had told me in excruciating detail, was to sacrifice one of his slaves of lesser value. He would order his secretary to write up a letter alleging an accident at one of his sites, or with one of his insured slaves, and demand the required payout upon death. Most were deemed interchangeable. The Senator was careful to take out life insurance policies for the hazardous work done in certain of his enterprises. Ironically enough, he had gone to great lengths to stress to me the name of this company, to impress upon me the futility of running. He'd proclaimed that even in New York, the very heart of the North, our lives were in his hand. And, he had equally stressed, there was nothing I, nor even the law, could do about it. It was all very hideously legal. So, someone I cared for would always be made to pay, and that pay out would always accrue to the Senator's benefit, if I tried to run. I nearly broke down as I recalled his long tirade.

Immediately after little Sal and I had been forced to watch our friends whipped to bloody shreds after I had run, that first time. I did not have the luxury of time, this night, and so I mastered

myself, focusing on the task at hand. Why was that building still on fire, and why was no one trying to put the fire out? What did it mean for us? If the Senator had purchased the building here, which was currently being allowed to burn, then that might be the reason that no effort seemed to be made to put out the fire. The Senator wanted that building to burn. But why? It only distracted everyone in the area, to no good… unless that was precisely what the odious man wanted. A distraction so that his hired men would have a free hand to do as they saw fit, while all eyes were on the fire. If the Senator's boasting had been true, then this fire might draw more local men, putting them at that hideous Smith's disposal. Fortunately, they had evidently not counted on such firm opposition by the Constables to the use of the dogs.

Unfortunately, the fire might also be keeping Old Mary away. After all, it had been directly opposite the fire, where our mount had cut to the side of the road. It only now occurred to me that the north side was just about the only way that we could possibly have run. No one in his right mind would run toward such a fire. That meant Smith had intended for his lackeys to be searching on this side of the road. I must find Tilly, right now!

Where were her tracks? I was about where I thought we had each come out of the saddle, but I saw nothing. Old Mary certainly ought to have left imprints. As the minutes wore on, I feared that I was running out of time. Surely there must be some evidence that even I could see.

How had our young Tilly managed to disappear without a trace, right under my nose? Had Old Mary come back for her, once again performing that circus trick of sidling right up under the child, who would be much easier to carry than I had been, and taken her off somewhere, further into the woods, perhaps, to relative safety?

“Where are you, child?”

Why had I not seen nor heard any sign of them, as close as they must have been to me? Or was I entirely mistaken, and looking for little Tilly in the wrong area altogether?

One thing was clear. Young Tilly, myself, and even Old Mary, were in terrible danger, and it was my solemn duty to get all three of us out of that danger. I had promised Anna that I would get the three of us to our rendezvous point with her, no matter what the cost, and that was just what I intended to do. The first predawn light was beginning to shine upon the horizon. To my growing horror, I realized that not only was I quickly becoming a sitting duck, but worse, I could hear the sound of footsteps approaching. I ducked even lower. As the footsteps died away, it hit me. I needed to know who was out and about. I screwed up my courage once more, ordering the churning in my stomach to be still. I peered up and over the low shrubs where I had been hiding.

What I saw gave me enough heart to risk coming out of my hiding place.

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Chapter 28

“Senator, sir, the expense of this search might ruin you.”

Loving was wrong. He would not be ruined. It was his plan that had been ruined. By sheer incompetence. These fools. He would remedy this. He would remedy it all, and he would get her back, even if it took his very last Virginia penny. But it would certainly never come to that. His constituents would never consent to allow such an indignity to come to pass, and neither would his Commonwealth. They would not be disgraced by those subversives in Maryland and the damned Yankees in Pennsylvania. No, sir. He paid good money to that Yankee insurance racket, and he damned well would have the worth of it.

“Loving, what are you looking at!”

The man was still staring at him blankly, as if pinching a few pennies was going to solve this problem. Loving was usually competent, keeping the estates and holdings in good order. Like Potiphar to Joseph, the Senator prided himself on not having to look to anything under his man’s hand, but right now, his personal secretary was becoming an onerous burden.

“I have told you, Loving. This is my intention. You will write up the claim, as if written under my very own hand and seal, and you will file it with that Yankee company, that they may pay out my dead servants’ value, as they have agreed to by contract.”

“But, Senator, sir?”

Why was this so difficult for the man to comprehend?

“What is it now, Loving?”

“Sir, they, the company, that is, will send an investigator, and they will want more details-”

“I have told you what you are to say. That will have to do for them, and it will suffice.”

“But Senator, sir, if they open an investigation, and if a reporter gets wind of that investigation, then the scandal could reach you in the Senate. Sir, I-”

The Senator rose in indignation, picking up his cane to feel the comforting heft of it. “There will be no investigation, Loving, and there will be no scandal! I have told you what to do, now you go and do it. You go and you see to it, or I will have your hide, do you hear me?”

His secretary had looked down at the floor, almost as if he were one of the damned darkies, and muttered some nonsense about acquiescence or something, before skulking out of the room.

He looked across the room, to where his new valet stood by waiting for orders, and gave an irritable snarl:

“Call Smith in here.”

The young darkie had given a barely tolerable bow as he left the room. He would need more disciplining, that one.

Smith had entered the room with his hat already in his hand for a change, which was about time. The man's usual swaggering entrance, his hat still on, arrogantly sweeping it off as if he was some high and mighty thing, annoyed the Senator. Smith looked abashed, and he ought to have, thought the Senator. *He has failed me, and he should pay the price.* But then, Smith was one of his best men, and had served him faithfully for years, so the Senator decided to show him some Southern graciousness. But not too much.

"Senator, sir."

The Senator looked Smith up and down, intending to send him a stern rebuke. There was a delicate balance with this man. The Senator knew Smith's pride, and did not want to risk giving him too harsh a punishment. He needed this one too much. Of all his overseers, Smith was the only one he could trust to see that jobs got done. That was why he kept him on as head overseer, in spite of the man's arrogance.

He glared at his hired man:

"Smith,"

"Yes, sir, Senator, sir?"

Good, the man was contrite. He had failed, he knew it, and he was admitting to it. Good man. The Senator went on, pleased:

“I am disappointed in you.”

He was even more pleased to see Smith almost stumble over himself, bowing so low he nearly fell to his knees.

“I will do better, Senator. I promise you, sir, we will find her. My two best boys are out there right now, looking, and the rest of the boys and the dogs are coming up from home, sir. I’ll get her back for you, sir, you can trust me.”

The Senator eyed his man suspiciously, and then relented.

“Alright, Smith, I will trust you. But only this one more time. You find her for me, and bring her back. I will stay in this inn until you do. You bring her to me, here.”

“Yes, sir, Senator, I will.”

“You had better.”

He nodded his head in dismissal, and his valet opened the door, waiting for Smith to make his bows and exit, before softly shutting the door with a barely audible click. *Good, this one’s getting better. Very good.*

He would have her back, and soon.

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Chapter 29

I ducked, and held my breath, waiting. It was a man. He froze in place, then turned, taking three steps back in my direction. It was that very same former slave whom we had passed earlier on the road. Except that now, by the look on his face, something more was painfully clear. He was no *former* slave. In the eyes of the law, even here in Pennsylvania, as an escapee, he was as much a fugitive as I.

"It's ok." he whispered.

I had shrunk back down, watching him through a gap in the shrubbery. He might not have seen me, but he had certainly heard me. Should I trust him?

"Who-"

He looked around slowly, making no sound at all, then stopped, looking directly where I crouched. Now it was my turn to freeze. Should I try to stay hidden, or trust him, as a fellow fugitive? He might have valuable information for me. Should I risk trying to talk with him? *Come now, let us reason together*. Where had that verse come from, now of all times? But then, it occurred to me, this was exactly the right time for reasoning together, was it not? I would need help to find young Tilly, and quickly. I took a deep breath, praying that I was not making the worst mistake of my life, and stood up. His jaw dropped when he saw me. It was clear that he recognized me from when he had tried to warn us. Poor Miss Mary and little Sal. My fault. I reminded

myself: there was no time for that. I must do whatever it took to find Tilly. The man nodded to me. I finally returned his nod, admitting:

"I should have heeded your warning."

He grimaced and nodded again.

"Yes, well, and I should have left this town long ago," he smiled, "so I guess we both done acted the fool."

I gave him a weak half smile, and decided I would have to trust him. I had to take the risk. I asked him, "Have you seen a small girl, just now, the one -"

"You mean that little child you was riding with, Miss, when I saw you back up on the road?"

Hope leapt up in my chest, halted by my bodice. Had he seen her, and if so, where?

"Yes, that one."

Then I remembered, appalled: "And you don't have to, please don't call me *Miss*. I'm just like you. We are the same."

The look he had given me then said that we were anything but the same. I ignored it.

"That little child, did you…"

He shook his head. My moment of courage failed me like the breath that had left my chest. Then, that child's own words, back at Dr. H's house, came back to me. We must both be strong, and of good courage, if ever we were to come out of this situation with our lives, let alone our liberty.

A sound in the woods made both of us drop to the ground. Just an owl. We both arose as it flew to a nearby tree, something hanging from its mouth. I shrugged, and smiled.

"At least someone will get to eat soon, anyway, even if it isn't us."

My companion also smiled, giving a gesture of similar acceptance. Stoic, as the Senator had once called me, when I had refused to complain. He had questioned me about the smell of bacon in the mornings. The bacon I was not allowed to eat. To punish my lack of enthusiasm for his attentions. There was no point in complaining about things one couldn't have. What privations had this man, standing before me, also suffered, I wondered. I put the thought aside.

"I-"

I put up a hand for silence. It seemed oddly quiet. Where was little Tilly? Hungry and cold, her slight frame would not last long out here. People would be up and starting their daily chores, soon. As the daylight grew, I expected a mess of tracks, but there were none to be seen. Then, I realized that I had entirely forgotten my manners.

"I am sorry," I stammered, "I am Willow," I said, trying to give a polite smile. It must have come out more as a grimace, for my lip was starting to tremble as I fought to hold back the despair. I had interrupted him.

"I meant no insult to you, Mr. ...?"

He tipped his hat, and said something about preferring not to use names.

"Oh," I now recalled that Dr. H. had said much the same thing. I tried to think of some other name.

"How about calling me Berty, then?"

He but popped his hand over his mouth, shaking his head, and asked:

"Berty?"

He looked like he was trying not to laugh.

“Why Berty?”

I recalled what Anna first told me about some various types of trees, and explained:

“I really like birch trees, so why not become one, for a little while?”

He had doffed his hat once more, bowing:

“Very pleased to meet you, Miss Berty.”

I smiled, in spite of myself.

“And what, kind sir, shall I call you, if you please?”

“Oh, you don’t need to be callin’ me Sir, Ma’am.”

I noted that he looked pleased, nonetheless. He glanced all around us, and I did the same, listening again for any approaching threats. We seemed to be farther from that road than I had thought. Old Mary must run a great deal faster than I had given her credit for, despite her age. The movement of a hat being swept along the ground, as my companion made a leg in gentlemanly fashion, recaptured my attention.

“Farmer Brown, at your humble service, *Miss Berty*!”

We shared a quiet laugh. Then, introductions over, I was anxious to resume my search for young Tilly. I knew *Farmer Brown* was also making away from this town. I laid a finger to my chin as I looked at him, waiting to ask my question. He tilted his head to one side, and pursed his lips.

"Hmm?"

"Do you recall what our horse looked like, the one that young…"

I stopped to think of a new name to call Tilly, for the sake of safety. I chose the name of the scullery maid from that awful tavern, "Lizzy, and I were riding?"

He nodded. Old Mary was easy to recognize, a large white star on her chest. I hoped he had missed it in the darkness on the road.

"I seen her well enough, yo mare, Miss *Berty*," and we both smiled again, "but 'fraid I have not seen one peep of her, nor your girl child, since then."

My bitter disappointment must have shown, for he hastened to add: "but don't you fret now, *Miss Berty*," he smiled, "because we got lots of help in this here town."

My head shot up. I looked at him more closely, and some relief, mingled with not a small amount of shock, must have shown on my face, for he leaned closer whispering:

“We got more than one Conductor in this town, ‘cause lots of people like us comes up this way.”

I almost wept in relief.

“But, why, *Farmer Brown* is no one up and about, yet?”

He coughed out what seemed like a bitter laugh, shaking his head:

“Oh, none of these town folk, these *citizens*, like they call theyselves, will be out and about right now, don’t you worry, not a one.”

My perplexity must have shown on my face, for he added, in a more confidential tone:

“All of the white folks here is hiding in they homes with the shutters locked an’ the candles all put out, so’s not to be pressed into service by them slave catchers.”

“Aha,” that made sense, “so this new law, just lately,” I had not wanted to tell my companion that the law was a few years old, now, “passed, even has the white folks up here worried?”

“Oh, yeah,” he had affirmed.

“These white folk, some of who’s as been real nice to me, and to the others, too, has got theyselves all riled up ‘bout this new law,” he’d smiled, and it was definitely a bitter smile, this time, “yes, ma’am,” he’d said, drawing out both words, “they got all mad, nearly frothing at the mouth like mad dogs, whoopin’ an hollerin, but, then…” he trailed off.

I tilted my head, now, waiting for him to continue.

He shot a sad looking smile at me, “but I ‘spose I can’t blame ‘em,” he looked down, and then back up, almost whispering, “they ain’t about to put theyselves and they families in trouble just to help out the likes of us.”

This reminded me just how brave Dr. H. and his wife really were, to help the three of us as they had.

“Did you say there was another Conductor nearby?”

My companion looked around, pursed his lips, and nodded his head.

“I did heard a noise, back yonder, by the house of a Free Issue friend of mine.”

A noise? My eyebrows shot up. Tilly? Old Mary?

“Name o’ Brutus.”

“Brutus?”

My eyebrows rose higher. Generally, freedmen hated to keep such obvious former slave names.

“Yes, ma’am. He done kept his old name, but won’t tell no one why. Not a soul.”

Brutus, it seemed, had kept that name, for his own reasons. And it was famous. I recalled hearing the Senator use that name, but not in a good way. I had heard the Senator yelling this name, in great anger. I didn’t know who Brutus was, but now, I clearly needed to know.

“Could he help me find her?”

I hoped I didn’t sound like I was begging.

“Well, now Brutus got his Free Papers hangin’ on the wall, nice house. Got hisself a young wife, new baby. Good cook, too.”

I hated to put that family at risk, but I had to try, for Tilly’s sake.

“May I ask where you met?”

“Oh I met him at our negro school. Pastor teaches at the church, after services. Our Negro Preacher is another Free Issue man with proper papers.”

“Do you think they might know…”

I stopped short, shuddering at the idea of what would happen to any Negro, free or bond, found to be helping one of us. This Brutus’ home might even be the first place that Smith would look, if he could find out where any of the colored townspeople resided.

Another noise make both of us duck.

I was getting tired, and commented, as we arose: “We should probably find a safer place to talk.”

He nodded.

“Do you think this Brutus’ might risk helping little…”

I could say no more, for risk, and a great risk, there surely was. Smith might go from door to door, after the denial by the Pennsylvania constables of his use of dogs. He would kick in those doors, free or not. I gasped as I thought of that evil man taking Tilly away.

Farmer Brown looked at me, a worried expression on his face.

“Don’t you fret too much, miss Berty, cause up here, even we gots rights,” then he heaved a sigh, “well, those of us as got Free Papers, anyways.”

So, that was why this Brutus displayed his papers on the wall of his home.

“I know Smith.”

I jerked my head toward the fire.

“He would just as soon burn the house with those Papers down around poor Brutus’ ears.”

Then, as we ducked again at another sound, my companion surprised me. He shook his head:

“These constables here, they does they job pretty good. They never lets anybody,” and he looked at me hard, then repeated himself, “anybody, mess with old Brutus. That, and Brutus don’t let nobody mess with him, neither. Got a gun and everything.”

Now that was a shock. In Virginia, it was forbidden for any colored person to even look at a gun, much less touch one. To own one was not even a possibility I had ever imagined. This gave me courage:

"Then, *Farmer Brown*, sir, may I ask you a delicate question?"

He tilted his head and uttered an "Umm hm," as if he knew what the question would be.

"Would you tell me how to get to Mr. Brutus' house?"

He gave me a look that left no doubt as to his lack of faith in my ability to find my way. I did not, disagree. But I did have to try.

"I know it is dangerous, but I must find her."

He looked at me with a further tilt of the head, and a grimace that showed his thoughts. I looked at him again.

"That child is my responsibility, and I will see her safely North, or die trying."

That got his attention.

I continued:

“There is no other way.”

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Chapter 30

Farmer Brown finally agreed to take me to the home of Brutus, insisting on making introductions himself, before heading North. I wondered if he had been a farmer, or wanted a farm of his own, one day. How he planned to get up North, he would not say.

We arrived at the home of Brutus, which indeed seemed to be nicely appointed. We crept around the back, from the woods.

"He got a back door off o' the kitchen that he always keeps an eye on…"

I had never known any prosperous Freedmen. They were not allowed in Virginia.

We made our way toward the back door, which did indeed appear to be propped open despite the cold. I smelled the mouth-watering scents of cooking food. I also heard a familiar sound that made my heart stop. It was that odd noise that Old Mary always made when she first saw me!

My companion had heard it as well, for he lifted his head in the direction I had looked, and then swiveled about. We both stood stock still. Then, I saw the head of Old Mary peek out from a clump of bushes. She was lying down, her head near the ground. How had she managed to hide herself here, and why? Then I recalled what she had done with me, when I was injured. She must

have stayed as close to little Tilly as possible. *Good girl!* Now I was nearly certain that young Tilly must be sheltering in this home.

I ran over, leaving Farmer Brown where he stood, and squeezed in with Old Mary. The horse was laid out on the ground, just as she had been back when I had fallen from her, with one difference. Her leg.

"Old Mary!"

She flicked her head toward me as I knelt down beside her.

I stood up to lead her out, murmuring softly to her that it was safe, but she stayed on the ground for a long time. When I finally managed to coax her up, she stood, as a cat does when it has a splinter in its paw, weight on three of her legs, with the fourth hoof hovering just above the ground. *This cannot be good.* I bent, parting the bushes and holding them so that she could easily step out into the clearing next to the yard, and saw that she limped, favoring that leg.

She shied slightly as Farmer Brown finally came to join us. He murmured softly, putting his hand out for her to smell. That gave me the idea that she really must not be feeling well. Clearly her leg, or maybe her hoof, I did not know, was in need of attention. I had not the slightest idea what to do for her. I turned to Farmer Brown.

"Mr. *Brown*, can you help poor Old Mary, here?"

He cast a look all around, then looked back up at me. He shook his head.

"I don't rightly know, but seems to me that when a horse can't stand up, then, sorry to say, they usually gots to put it down."

No, that definitely would not do. Old Mary, was too special. My attachment to her aside, she was not just any ordinary horse. Even I could see that. But was it safe to tell my new acquaintance? As I thought on it, I realized that he may know a Conductor or two here in the town, but I doubted that he would know about other Conductors, stations, and their secrets. That was the point, after all was it not?

Keeping everyone safe from those who would find us, like the Senator and Charles Price, required that the right hand not know what the left hand was doing. If this Brutus did not recognize Old Mary, that likely meant that he, too, was kept deliberately ignorant.

"This horse has special training. She must be saved."

He quirked an eyebrow. Clearly, he doubted me.

I would need to work extra hard to protect Old Mary. Not only for her sake, but for Tilly's and mine, and the entire network, as well. I believed that where Old Mary was, young Tilly was not

likely to be far. But how to insist on having this horse healed, rather than put down, without giving away her secrets?

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Chapter 31

“Have you lost your cotton-picking mind?”

We were standing outside, I guessed in the kitchen vegetable patch. A sturdily built dark-skinned man strode out to meet us. The jagged scar down one side of his face met us first. He hurled a look that could’ve killed a bear at my companion.

“What do you mean by bringing a lady of quality around here, fool?”

How on earth could he have mistaken me for a well to do white woman, especially attired in my traveling clothes as I was? I hastened to correct him.

“I am not a-”

“I know what you are,” the big man had spat out, not even sparing a glance in my direction.

His words struck me like a slap in the face.

I lowered my head instinctively at the effect of that familiar tone, the same one the Senator always used on me. Then I remembered. This man, this Brutus, or whoever he might be, was not the Senator, and I was no longer a Fancy. *Never again.*

Ever. I straightened my head, pulled myself up to my full height, and tried to look defiant. I gave him what I hoped would pass for a cold stare.

"What I am, or am not, sir, is of no concern. This horse, I can assure you, most certainly is."

I saw two heads swivel in my direction as I pointed down at Old Mary's hoof.

"This is Old Mary. She is a very special horse. I do not know how, as I know nothing of horses," I paused as Brutus rolled his eyes, "but I do know that she has what can only be called some *extraordinary*," I made sure to draw out the word, for Brutus' benefit, "sort of training."

At the lift of the large man's eye brows, I added, "More than that, I am not at liberty to say."

At his scowl, I hastened to add:

"Just yet."

He rolled his eyes again.

"Just yet?"

At least I had his attention. *He must have seen her.* Old Mary could only be here in this state if she had refused to leave young Tilly, as she had done with me when I lay injured. Even if she was merely here because this was where she had been injured, it did not make sense.

Such an intelligent creature would not stay near a house, trained as she was to avoid capture. Thus, Tilly had to be here. And I must find her before they did.

As for the other problem, my "Quality" problem, I was grateful that young Tilly was dark-skinned. At least she should be spared the suspicion which generally fell upon those of us who were lighter skinned.

I could understand his suspicion, for had I not heard in secret, myself, of those many slave rebellions smothered in their cradles by the betrayal of some mulatto or other to the masters? Had I not even seen, with my own eyes, how many of my fellow light-skinned slaves treated our darker fellows, as if we were not all chained in the same misery of bondage? Yet, was it not both unfair and unwise, to judge me merely upon a glance at the tone of my skin, rather than by my deeds?

"Well then, missy," Brutus had answered suddenly with a glare toward my companion, stifling a word from our *Farmer Brown*, "just what *can* this horse of yours do?"

Brutus had asked this, and waited, as if he didn't expect that Old Mary could do any more than walk in a straight line, an almost comical expression on his face.

“Well, for one thing, I have seen her,” I hesitated.

“Hiding.”

Mr. *Brown* had broken in to speak on my behalf. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

“What?!”

I flinched at Brutus’ half shouted retort. Old Mary merely grunted. I shared her disapproval. Mr. *Brown*, on the other hand, grinned.

He seemed to be enjoying this. I had to admit that I was enjoying his mild one-upping of this so far unpleasant Freedman. I was glad that I had not been the one to mention Old Mary’s ability to hide.

Brutus shook his head.

“No.”

Mr. Brown nodded vigorously.

“You heard me,” he’d said with a lift of both his eyebrows and a tilt of his head, back toward Old Mary.

Brutus’ eyes had followed that tilted head over to Old Mary, seeming to look at her closely, now, for the first time. Our Mr. Brown had continued, in what sounded to me very much like an amused tone of voice:

“We found her laying herself down right there on the ground all shut up inside her own little bush arbor.”

Brutus snorted.

“Right. And I-”

Farmer Brown cut him off:

“This here little mare knows how to hide herself,” he said, nodding at Old Mary. Then he winked at me!

The two men exchanged a look that confirmed my suspicion. There was more than a bit of bad blood between them. Farmer Brown seemed to be enjoying it immensely. I imagined he didn’t often get the better of this arrogant man.

Brutus, at last, had looked at me. I contented myself with a nod.

Brutus looked back at Old Mary.

“What else?”

“I am not sure what you mean, sir.”

He rolled his eyes at me as if to say that the Quality was also an idiot, before demanding:

“What else can this little mare of yours do?”

Both men looked at me and crossed their arms as if they were twins. I feared they might shoot poor Old Mary on the spot.

“Well,” I hesitated, lest Brutus decide to appropriate Old Mary for himself.

“I am not at liberty to speak of persons involved in her training.”

“Then I may not be at liberty to keep her here.”

That finally decided me. If I was to find little Tilly, I must have help, and I must have Old Mary.

“She will stay with an injured rider. She can also lay down beside and even slide under a rider who has fallen off.”

Brutus pursed his lips and nodded, judging the risks, and cost, of tending to Old Mary. I’d been about to add that I would be happy to help tending to Old Mary's wounds, when he looked up. I held my breath.

“Come on, then.”

He turned on his heel, stopped, looked back at both of us, and beckoned us to follow him. We followed Brutus, and Old Mary followed me, limping slowly on her three good feet. I hoped she was not in too much pain.

We went to what appeared to be a good sized barn, with two horses. They looked out and began to nicker in that way that Old Mary did when she wanted to be fed. Brutus must have been coming out to feed his animals when he saw us.

I was wrong.

Brutus stopped in the middle of the barn, looking up toward a large loft overflowing with hay. He called out:

”It’s alright to come down now.”

Several small faces appeared, bits of hay falling down on us. They climbed down and we made introductions while looking over Old Mary with a fine toothed comb. She took it all in stride. I however, was growing more and more anxious about young Tilly. *I must ask them.* Sooner or later, *Farmer Brown* was certain to tell them about how he had met Tilly and myself on the road.

"Has anyone seen a young girl? She fell off of Old Mary last night."

"No, no one has seen anyone."

Brutus folded his arms, his face set.

Mr. *Brown* gave him a curious look.

"I was told that there were those who help "North star followers" in this town. Surely-"

"No. There are none."

He scowled at me, and I fell silent. Something was awry. That flatly contradicted what *Farmer Brown* had told me. I would just have to trust Brutus. I needed help for poor Old Mary, here, and information about young Tilly.

"Come on, these animals want feeding and nursing, and then we can go in and eat."

The children had crowded around the mare until their mother had come in from the house. She had introduced herself as Henrietta, then ordered the children to finish their chores. She helped Brutus, already tending to Old Mary. That done, she invited us to come in and eat with them.

As we ate, I worried. I needed to find Tilly. But to do that I needed Old Mary. Clearly, Old Mary would have to stay here long enough for her leg to heal. Brutus' wife graciously accepted my offer to help clean the kitchen after breakfast. I took the opportunity to ask her about Tilly, but her response had been the same as that of her husband's. *They don't trust me.* I was a stranger, in dangerous times. There had to be a grapevine in this town. For better and for worse. For the moment, I must stay with Old Mary and learn how to care for her. I would also seek information from any and every source. I would find young Tilly.

Old Mary turned out not to be too badly injured. It was a rock caught up in what seemed to be called a *Frog*, a soft spongy part her hoof. They began teaching me how to clean it. A few days of rest and she should be as good as new. I also offered to help taking care of some of the barn chores, as thanks for the lessons and the feeding of Old Mary.

Henrietta came out to invite me to have dinner with them. With dinner finished, we cleared and cleaned the dishes, while Brutus left to make the rounds of the property. Henrietta thanked me for my work in the barn and the kitchen.

“I see your hands are not used to manual labor. This balm,” she handed me a small box, “will help to soothe that raw skin.”

“I thank you kindly, Mrs.-”

She had pulled me into a hug, as she nodded her head, and then informed me that I was welcome to stay with them, at least while Old Mary’s hoof healed.

I gratefully accepted the offer of hospitality, adding that I was competent with the embroidery needle, an offer which she graciously declined. It only belatedly occurred to me that a small family farm would not have use for such decorative touches when there was still much work to be done on the practical things about the place.

By the time we had these details ironed out, it was growing dark. I noticed that they seemed to be scrupulously avoiding my questions about Tilly. In fact, everyone seemed to be avoiding asking after any of my details. *This makes no sense.* I was brushing Old Mary for the night, and Brutus stopped short, looking surprised to see me with what I now knew to be called a curry comb.

“What, have you never seen a lady of Quality, as you put it, currying a horse before, sir?”

Brutus replied with a grunt. Then he dropped a set of blankets, a chamber pot, and a water basin with a pitcher beside me. He looked up at me and said:

“The Quality here can sleep out in the barn, with her horse.”

Enough was enough. I cleared my throat:

“I would be very much obliged to you, Mr. Brutus, if you would call me Berty.”

To my delight, he had again looked surprised. His obvious assumption that I, as a light-skinned woman, would stay quiet and mousy, was being challenged. That was good. For both of us.

“Berty, huh?”

He snorted as if this were the highest irony possible. I could have sworn, nonetheless, that I did catch just the tiniest hint of approval as he sauntered out of the barn.

***

Chapter 32

I awoke just before sunrise to the soft nuzzling of Old Mary's habitual morning greeting.

"Good mornin', ma'am. How are you this morning, Old Mary?"

The first thing I thought of was Old Mary's frog, but the next thing I thought of was Tilly. I had slept in her stall, curled up next to her for warmth, even sharing one of my blankets with her, since I did not know if horses felt the cold the way people do. I worried about both Anna and Tilly, as I tried not to mourn for my poor teacher, Miss Mary. Was she was alive or dead? I pushed away the thought of what might have happened to poor little Sal, using the work of examining and cleaning Old Mary's hoof to force myself to focus on the here and now. *I must start making inquiries to find Tilly*, I reminded myself, trying not to worry about where my dear Anna might be right now. I feared that she might worry if we took too long to get to our destination. That plan now seemed like nearly a lifetime ago.

I gave Old Mary and the other horses their morning feed, as the children had taught me. Then I started on their barn chores, mucking out the stalls. I was finishing the first stall when I heard *Farmer Brown* call out:

"Good morning, Miss Berty! Are you decent?"

"Yes sir, I am."

He doffed his hat to me as I turned to greet him, leaning on my rake. He started to laugh as if the circus was in town.

"What's so funny?"

He swiped at his face, wiping tears out of his eyes, and pointed to my legs. Then he laughed even more. I looked down to see my bloomers, now spattered in muck. I had tucked my skirts up but forgotten about my expensive undergarments.

"Oh."

Now I saw why barn chores was children's work.

I began to laugh along with him. Then I saw three little heads pop up, laughing with us. The children were rolling in the hay up in the loft. Old Mary, whose presence I had entirely forgotten, nudged me in the back affectionately with her head, and I rubbed her muzzle.

"I am sorry that I have no carrots or apples for you, ma'am."

Old Mary tossed her head.

“That’s not like you, miss Lady.” *Are you also worrying about our little Tilly?* I saw *Farmer Brown* looking at us, but he held his peace.

“Could you have a look at my work on Old Mary’s frog, here, please, Mr. Brown? I just want to be sure-”

He stepped over and took hold of her hoof mid sentence.

“Won’t you take her out of her stall and bring her over by the door. Light’s better.”

Why had I not thought of that this morning?

He had inspected it, pronounced it a tolerably good job, and then cleaned it just a bit more before spreading a salve on it.

“Breakfast is ready.”

We both jumped.

Henrietta smiled as she turned, gesturing gracefully for us to follow her. Neither of us had heard her come in.

Mr. Brown looked around, seeing the result of all the morning's earlier work, and gave me a satisfied nod:

"You learn pretty quick there, Miss Berty."

I felt a surge of pride as I straightened up and delivered him my best curtsy.

"Why thank you kindly, *Farmer Brown*."

I couldn't help adding a slightly mocking intonation. He shook his head while rolling his eyes, and then did something I did not expect.

He offered me his arm. I accepted, glad for the comradery, and that I was at last beginning to learn some useful skills.

As we ate breakfast, I noticed Brutus observing me. He had the look of one who is trying to make up his mind about something. I had seen that look before. He was deciding what information to share with me.

Brutus exchanged a glance with his wife, then cleared his throat. We all stopped eating, and looked up at Brutus. He looked directly at me:

"I have seen the work you did today. You are a quick study, *Miss Berty*."

A general chuckle went around the table.

"And you are also a hard worker."

I nodded my thanks, waiting for him to continue.

"I will also admit that this is not something I had expected to see from the Quality," his wife had looked sharply at him, and he grinned, adding, "Miss *Berty.*"

I smiled, and looked over at our *Farmer Brown*, before looking back at Brutus. I quirked an eyebrow. Surely Brutus had more to say.

"Miss Berty," he began, "I want to apologize to you, for the way I treated you yesterday."

He had the good grace to look slightly embarrassed as I nodded my acceptance.

He went on, "You will know, of course, that many people of your complexion are not always friends to those of us with darker hued skin."

I frowned, not knowing what to say. I knew that it was so. After a moment, I decided that there was really nothing I could say, and so I blinked, and nodded slowly. He looked satisfied, and drew a deep breath, as if he were about to reveal some important secret.

"I am one of the Conductors in this town."

He paused. I nodded again, grateful.

"Thank you for-"

But he held up a hand, and I fell silent.

"Our *Farmer Brown* here," at this he arched an eyebrow in Mr. Brown's direction, "has told me that you are anxious to know the whereabouts of the young child he saw traveling with you the other night."

"Yes, do you know-"

Again, he held up his hand:

"Yes, I have news of a young child, who seems to fit the description that I have of your girl, and she is safe."

I let out a sigh of relief that must have been heard all the way down to Mexico, and then looked at him, waiting.

He nodded, repeating, “she is safe,” and gave me a strange look, then continued, “with a trusted family, being looked after, as you are here, looking after your horse.”

He fell silent, then, his face closed. *That is all I will hear, for now.* I nodded, and waited to see if he had anything more to say. He dug a fork into his grits, as did all of us, finishing our breakfasts in silence. At least I knew little Tilly to be safe. That was about all that I could ask for, right now.

After breakfast, I walked back to the barn with *Mr. Brown*, who was going to have a look at each of the horses from top to bottom. I was going back, without my bloomers, to the task of mucking out stalls and tidying up the barn.

After a while, as we worked, I heard him clear his throat, and looked up to see him watching me. I arched an eyebrow, waiting.

“Do you know what you plan to do,” he finally started, “once you get up North?”

Where had this question come from?

“I really haven’t had time to give it much thought,” I finally admitted.

“Why?”

“Cause you will have to,” he was taking care to speak each word, for some reason, one at a time, as if in warning, or in prophecy, “decide.”

Then he stopped and looked up at me, almost accusingly. And he waited.

“Decide?” What was he getting at?

“Decide what, I pray?” And I did pray it was not what I thought it was.

“What color you wants to be.”

The directness of it took me by surprise, but not the idea. It was, sickeningly, what I thought it would be. Again. The question of my loyalty. Of whether I would pass. For white.

“I don’t think there is a choice, for I doubt I could *pass* if I wanted to. We tried it already, young Tilly and I, in Maryland, and I cannot pass, it seems.”

“You could pass alright, up North,” Farmer Brown had paused, then added, “most likely, but not ‘til you gets up to New York, at least, ‘sept for one of these newcomers straight off the boat, an’ thas only if none of these slave catchers gets to ‘em fust.”

He’s right. That explained why Dr. H’s wife had believed that our ruse could succeed, but the Dr. himself had looked less hopeful. For a Northerner like herself, I was as good as White, but native Southerners prided themselves on being able to recognize a quadroon or even an octoroon on first sight.

He smiled, a bit sad looking.

“I been up to New York, sho’ wish I’da stayed up there, now, but I seen how they treat people like you.”

I looked up at him:

“People like me?” I frowned.

“How?”

“Like they was white,“ he said simply.

***

Chapter 33

Farmer Brown had left the barn, and Brutus had walked in, glaring at me:

“Your little gal has betrayed us.”

My breath cut short. *That can’t be right.* How could it be?

“What? Which little gal?”

How could that be possible? Young Tilly, he had told me, was safe. *Little Sal.* My dear little Sally. She had also known about Dr. H.

“No.”

Brutus glowered at me. Then, he repeated himself, as if speaking to a small child:

“You heard me right. I said your little high yella gal, has betrayed us.”

That could only mean little Sal.

“And what about Little Tilly?”

“Oh, she’s safe. Don’t you worry about her. She is in good hands. It’s that other little friend of yours,” he had looked at me, here, as if to emphasize that young Tilly could not possibly be any real relation to me, “that quadroon child.”

His look was even more hostile than when we first met.

“Little Sal.”

He had nodded once, and then pursed his lips. I fought to keep the tears in my eyes from brimming over, recalling the flesh of Miss Mary’s back hanging in ribbons from her limp body, little Sal tied next to her. I refused to believe that this man, and this whole town, could believe that small child guilty of such a thing.

“Who could she have possibly betrayed, she is-”

“From here to half of Maryland,” he had said, a grim set to his face that promised swift and brutal vengeance upon the source of this calamity. I stepped back, aghast. He spat out the confirmation I had feared:

“Dr. H, his wife, and another Conductor, too.”

My stomach turned. Our meeting site by the President's House, and from there to Dr. H's house. She knew.

"But she was whipped, wasn't she," I began, hoping to make him see reason, "she was just a little thing."

My pleading eyes met rock solid refusal in his stare.

"She is just like little Tilly!"

He shook his head, setting his face against me, as if the two young girls were not only of different skin colors, but belonged to two different species' altogether. As if I were also from a wholly different species than he.

I frowned. Then I understood. The grapevine must be asking how could I resist turning on the rest of them.

"Really?"

His tone of voice woke me up, hitting me in the chest. I felt as if a hole had been punched in my very heart.

“What is wrong with you?”

I had not been able to contain myself.

“That poor girl has clearly been forced.”

More grief threatened to break my gritted teeth and spill past my lips.

Brutus only glared. Then he spat out the worst of it:

“She has compromised our entire operation for moving people across the Mason-Dixon Line.”

“What?”

I swallowed the bile that began to rise up in my throat. All our hopes, ruined. How? I had seen little Sal tied there, that night, by the light of the fire. Then I remembered. Even worse than the information that little Sal might have divulged. If her confessions had led them to Dr. H, then that meant…

“Berty?”

Berty? Who was Berty? A female voice, deep and soothing, was calling that name, almost in a whisper, while something warm and soft patted my face. The voice sounded familiar, and not

dangerous, but who? It was not Miss Mary, nor yet that of my dear and so long missed Anna. The smell of lavender wafted into my nose, and with it, that voice:

"Miss Berty, Honey, wake up."

I opened my eyes, and Henrietta's face brought me back to the present moment. And to the present problem. *Oh, God, I must have fainted.* Every one from Pennsylvania down to Virginia would be in danger, and… I clenched my fists to keep from vomiting. *Anna*. Then, all was nausea and darkness, again.

***

Chapter 34

"Miss Berty?"

That name. My temporary name, here in this place. I awoke again, this time fully aware of the awful situation. From little Sal's apparent betrayal, to the horrifying potential consequences. *Anna.*

I wished I could go back to sleep, never to wake again. But I had responsibilities. To young Tilly, to my dear Anna, to Dr. H and his generous wife, and to little Sal. I knew that her captors had torn those words from her by force. I refused to leave Anna or Tilly at their mercy.

"Miss Berty?"

Henrietta's voice pulled me out of my thoughts, and I opened my eyes, nodding: "I'm alright."

Her look of concern changed to one of relief.

"I am sorry to have worried you." She shushed me, and turned to a small side table. I sat up, looking around.

I was in the kitchen, resting on a bench pulled up against the wall, and covered with a blanket. How long had I been out, for heaven's sake? She turned back to me with a cup of what was either broth or tea, placing it carefully in my hands. It was swaddled like an infant, in a tightly knit cozy that fit protectively around the cup.

The same way I felt about my dear Anna. Anna, like Tilly, was now in terrible danger. I had failed to protect them. I tried to take a sip of the broth, but a tear fell into it. Brutus' wife looked into my eyes. It was a steady but kindly look, as if she were judging the weight of sharing some difficult news.

Would any of these people would ever trust me, or would I be banished? And what about Old Mary?

She took my hands in hers:

"Do not fret."

I looked at her with half a grimace. Not fretting was already a lost cause.

She put a finger to her lips.

“It’s safe, don’t worry. I’m only looking to see that we don’t have any unwanted eyes upon us,” then, with a little laugh, she continued, “but the ears, of course, are always at the door,” and dropping down to a whisper, she confided, “especially the littlest ears.”

We shared a bit of a laugh. All children spy on the adults, especially with a newcomer in the house.

Then I sighed. *Where are they?* I hoped that at least Tilly really was safe.

She put her hand on my shoulder.

“I know this is difficult, for you,” she tilted her head and nodded, as if finally having made up her mind.

“We must remember to be strong and of good courage,” she said, before taking both of my hands in hers, again.

I knew now that she was working her way up to telling me something, whether good or bad, I did not know. I held my breath, waiting.

She looked around again, even more carefully than before, and slid closer to me on the bench, bringing her lips to my ears:

“My husband has not agreed with me, but *I*,” and she put emphasis, here, on that word, “believe that you can be trusted.”

That was good, I supposed. *So maybe they won't put me out in the woods, after all.* But what did she mean by this? I had already been hanging on a prayer. Now it was my turn to tilt my head, as I waited for the Bible verse.

She finally rewarded my patience. She whispered:

"We know where your young friend, that dark-skinned little girl, is."

Was she testing me, or had she either forgotten, or chosen not to use Tilly's given name?

"Yes," I decided to take the bait, reminding her, "your husband said that young Tilly is safe." I said this with what I hoped was only the slightest hint of a question in my voice, "with a trusted family."

She nodded once. Then, she told me something that I had not known:

"Oh, yes, a very trusted family."

I was still waiting for the rest of that Bible verse. She finally cited it:

"That family is us," she had whispered. She'd put her hand out to steady me, continuing, "your little Tilly has been here all this time."

My eyes went wide.

“She got here the night before you did, while that big fire was still burning.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?”

“I am sorry,” she had whispered, “but my husband is not a trusting man,” *she could say that again*, “even when he ought to be,” and she did look genuinely sorry.

“Well, how is she? Where is she? May I see her?”

All of my questions tumbled out of my mouth as if a cat had just upset the sewing basket, and lay there in a jumbled heap, like my thoughts. Then, Brutus walked in.

Her hand shot out, holding me in an iron grip as I started to rise up, half startled at the sudden intrusion, and half in fury.

As he looked from one of us to the other, she handed me my broth, now cold. It came with a vice grip around my fingers, warning me to keep my foolish mouth shut. I obeyed.

Brutus settled an expectant look upon his wife’s face. I busied myself sipping my broth. It was even good cold. His wife gestured to the soup pot. But broth was not what her husband had on his mind. He fixed a cold stare on me, and demanded:

“Did you do that on purpose?”

“What?!”

His wife jumped up to face him, stammering half of a first name before changing it:

“Brutus,” she stuttered an “M,” before restarting with, “Brutus Elijah AlexANDER BROWN!”

That got his attention, but only for a moment. He had looked at her, shrugged, and then looked back at me, saying:

“Well?”

Before I could answer, the children pounded into the kitchen, followed closely by *Farmer Brown*. Before they could say anything, both parents turned and shouted:

“Go back to your chores!”

That left *Farmer Brown* standing in the doorway, until the withering looks directed at him forced him to leave. Brutus and his wife returned to their argument:

“M-” his wife stopped abruptly.

“Brutus, this girl is our guest, she cares for that child!”

Brutus flicked his hand.

“Miss *Berty*, here,” he said, looking at me, “is no girl, first of all. Secondly,” he looked up pointedly at his wife, “do we really know if she even is who she says she is, and how has she proven that she cares for that child, exactly?”

We both sputtered.

He rolled his eyes dramatically and added, “Oh, wait, I know, by fainting like a lady of Quality.”

His wife snorted, and then retorted, “You try wearing a bodice, man.”

He rolled his eyes again. I opened my mouth to speak, but was brought up short by the upheld hand of his wife. She pointed to my cup, as a mother commands a willful child to eat those collards. I went back to sipping my broth.

She glared at Brutus, and jerked her head toward ... *stairs*. *How have I never noticed them?* She pounded up those stairs like a soldier going to war. Brutus followed in her wake without so much as another glance in my direction.

My broth congealed as I strained to hear the argument going on upstairs. Mr. *Brown* and the children all came tiptoeing back in to the kitchen. As if on cue, the volume of the argument suddenly dropped below audible level. After a few minutes of disappointment in the kitchen, the

chores were remembered, and all of the would be eavesdroppers went back out to their respective tasks.

I finished my broth and recovered my composure, then went out in search of something useful to do. I decided to check on Old Mary, and continue spoiling the children by doing their barn chores for them.

"Evening."

It was Brutus, entering the barn as I swept.

"Evening," I nodded. At least we were back on speaking terms.

"Follow me."

We went into the house, and up the stairs. I had only seen them, but never mounted, until now. He knocked, and his wife opened the door, waving me in.

"Miss Willow!"

Tilly!

After I was finally admitted into their trust, I took over most of caring for young Tilly, sleeping with her in the little hidden room. Henrietta taught me how to treat a variety of different sorts of wounds and ailments.

Tilly had fallen out of the saddle onto a sharp fallen branch. The children had found her in time to stop the bleeding, but, she had a concussion. It was not as bad as the one that I had upon arrival at the home of Dr. H, for she had not lain unconscious for very long, but her tender age and size made her more fragile.

"Do you have the papers, Miss Willow?"

The precious contents of those saddlebags Old Mary had been carrying. Before I could answer, she added:

"Where is Old Mary?"

I hugged her close. The advanced maturity of this child, still at so tender an age, had brought tears to my eyes.

"She is safe," I assured Tilly, wishing that I could keep her safe, give her a happy childhood.

"Old Mary, our papers," I said, leaving out that *even the money*, which I had counted in the stable, were there, "all safe."

While she recovered, we did as we had during my convalescence at the home of Dr. H. Using a beautiful family Bible, and the children's copy of The New England Primer, we played the same game for learning our letters which Anna and I had played back in Maryland. Little Tilly, only slightly less instructed than I was, caught up with me in no time, and soon we were both learning new words, I in my usual way, by learning the entire word by heart, and her, by sounding out new words letter by letter.

As with Anna, we seemed to compliment one another, being able, betwixt the two of us, to read many passages of scripture quite soon, to the astonishment of the entire family.

I noticed that Brutus and his wife observed our game closely, always watching as we sought to test our learning. These letters could one day mean the difference between freedom and bondage.

One day, after I had sent young Tilly out to the garden for some lavender, as a short break from our reading work, Henrietta sat beside me.

"I see that you and young Tilly here get on quite well together. You learn your letters faster together, it seems to me, than I have ever seen anyone learn them before."

My appreciation must have shone like that pillar of fire in the desert, for she laughed, patting me gently on the shoulder.

"Why don't you take a break and help me chop up some vegetables?"

While we worked she explained how these foods went especially well with certain medicinal herbs. I had tried to pay her to send one of the children to the apothecary for a poultice for Tilly, adding that I also wished to buy the child a small present.

Neither Brutus, nor Henrietta, nor even Farmer Brown, as he lay low, staying with us until it was safe to get going on his way further up North, would hear of taking the least bit of our money. They all insisted that Tilly and I would have need of that money before we finished, on our way up to Canada. *They are right.* Our supply of warm clothing was wholly inadequate, even to my untrained Virginia eyes, to the journey that lay ahead of us.

I had asked Henrietta how to deal with this problem. She had handed me some thread, two bits of sturdy and warm-looking scrap fabric, and then, most importantly of all, a real sewing needle. I decided then that the Good Lord really must care for people like me, for I thought that I had died and gone to heaven.

Being trusted with a very real, and very sharp, sewing needle had been one of my more earnest goals, as I languished in that house back in Virginia. Now, at last, someone had decided that I was not too foolish to learn such a skill. Between learning how to sew, and learning how to read, I also learned that I had been lied to, back in Virginia. I really could be of use.

I redoubled my practice of my letters, setting one of the easier to read primer pages before me as I was about my sewing. Sometimes, I would catch Farmer Brown watching me. Only then did it occur to me to wonder. *Would he like to learn his letters, too?*

One day at breakfast he made an announcement.

“I must leave.”

I nearly choked on my egg. I had expected *Farmer Brown* to accompany us to our next Station. No one else seemed to be surprised.

I’d been waiting for the right time to ask a favor of him, but now I had to try: “Should you chance to happen upon a young fugitive with freckles, would you be favorably disposed to carry a message to her?”

He agreed that he would, and I later gave him a letter, written in my simple hand, and also carrying a note and some drawings by our young Tilly, to give to Anna, should the occasion arise.

I had caught Brutus keeping a eye on me as I tended to little Tilly’s needs, and as we learned our letters together. Finally, one day, it happened.

Brutus had paused on his way out to the barn, watching me clear the table, a small treat I had set aside for Tilly resting to one side.

I looked up at him, tilted my head and waited.

“You tend to that little Tilly like you were a mother to her.”

Then, without waiting for my reply, he tipped his hat to me, and went on his way out the door, leaving me in contented surprise.

A short while after our Farmer Brown had left to go North, once Tilly and Old Mary were both up and about, mostly cured of all their wounds, we began to plan our own departure. We waited a prudent time in order to keep the traffic leaving the town down to a discreet minimum.

As we ate a wonderful stew around the supper table one evening, Brutus quietly cleared his throat.

“I have had news, from one of the Porters in, another town, about that original Departure.” He looked at us, “the Departure that left young Tilly in the hands of Dr. H, rather unexpectedly.”

Everyone looked up, the stew forgotten.

“Dr. H and his wife have escaped the Constables in Maryland, and they are safe, up in Boston. The Doctor’s wife has family there who will hide them both.”

With the relief of that message came several other messages, from both the Doctor, and from his wife, for both Tilly and myself, separately. First, he had made a special note to warn Conductors and Porters that they must get as much information from young Tilly as she could give regarding the methods, resources, and likely intentions of her legal *owner*. The Doctor suspected that the

dogs and men who had led them from the earlier Departure that went awry, to his house after we left, were sent up to the area by that man, meaning to seek the child out.

Brutus, seeing my look of worry, nodded: “Put aside your cares, for the moment. You have a message sent specially from Dr. H’s wife.”

I wondered what she could possibly have to tell me, and he told us all that it was this: to guard what she had termed ‘my special gift’ for learning whole words quickly, as a secret. *Why?* I nodded in unison with everyone else at the table, my question unasked.

The results of that day’s news went far beyond the mere assurance that the Doctor and his wife were safe. This meant that someone before Little Sal had betrayed the trust, and the lives, of the Doctor and Adeleide. I also gained just a bit more trustworthiness. This was trust that I was surely going to need.

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Chapter 35

They are safe!

I rejoiced at the news about Dr. H. and Adeleide, but continued to worry for Anna. The holiday season was over, and it seemed as if centuries had gone by since we'd last seen her. Now that the worry of losing Tilly and Old Mary was past, and with both of them on the mend, it was time to accelerate our plans for the future. We must away, to Canada.

All of the household was still on guard for any strangers, for no one was safe this close to the border with Maryland. That attack dog, Smith, might still be sniffing around town searching for us. *Of course he is.* The real question was not whether he was searching, but where.

This would be the chief concern for both Brutus and the rest of the network of Conductors in the area. Brutus seemed to be keeping a close eye on the doings of every man, woman, and child in this town. The local grapevine was enormous efficient.

"Smith has been ordered by the local constables to leave town," Brutus announced, "with all of his men and dogs."

"And the Senator?" I had to ask. His employer was the real danger.

Brutus nodded:

"A certain Senator has also had charges brought against him, at our local courthouse, for a variety of offenses committed by his hired men that night."

Brutus smiled, and continued: "Smith was none too happy. He left, tail between his legs, to report back to his master. In failure." He took a sip from his cup. "The white citizens of this town have taken up legal proceedings, ensuring that neither Smith nor the Senator will be welcome here for a good long while."

I finally felt myself breathe. My first breath in a very long time. Brutus told us that the local colored residents had gathered separately to strengthen and add to their existing area patrol. I was astonished to learn that many free people of color were often kidnapped and sold into bondage in the deep South. Thus, the colored residents of many towns were in the habit of checking on one another and even patrolling, to prevent kidnappings.

"Smith is gone, for now, and the white folk around here are well riled up, so they won't be letting any dog searches, which are illegal here, or whippings take place, at least not in public view," Brutus had said," "but," he had cautioned, "he will be back, and there is nothing we can do to prevent that, thanks to that damned law of 1851."

Yes, that law. The one the Senator had boasted of having helped to pass, and force the northern states to accept, with such glee. The support of the white residents to our cause gave me

courage, but the coming spring, and our need to leave this haven, before Smith and his men came back and with their dogs, law or no law, gave me urgency.

That urgency lent a speed to my now competent sewing hands, using all of the scraps of warm fabric, or even animal pelts if they would make do, to sew more clothing for Tilly and myself that would be both warm, and give us more changes of clothing that might help throw our scents off, if dogs were tracking us. And they would be. For, legal or not, I knew that the Senator would use every tool in his arsenal to attack our freedom, and try to get us back. He had been hobbled, for now, but we must make haste, I felt, while his hands were tied, lest we lose this advantage.

With Old Mary now ready to carry our weight, I began preparations for our journey. Brutus and Henrietta refused to allow me to pay for anything, insisting that Tilly and I would need that money later. There were good hearted citizens from the North who sent us money in support of the work of the Conductors in this town, and others like it. I resolved to join in this work, when I was free, up North. I would help those who had helped us, and help free others from this odious Peculiar Institution.

Little Tilly also seemed anxious to go, though she would not say it. Her reading was quite nearly as good as mine, now, and she was looking better fed, healthy, and in the same high mischievous spirits as when I first met her, in the home of Dr. H.

“Let’s continue the *Joe Wright* game, Miss Willow, we can do it,” she stamped her little feet when she saw my answering frown, insisting, “I know we can!”

When I shook my head, opening my mouth to speak, she had cut me off, staring directly into my eyes, in that way that Anna had, intoning, as if to channel Anna's voice:

"Yes, we can."

I shook my head again.

"It's not a game, Tilly, lives are at stake."

When she folded her arms and turned her face down into a pout, I added:

"Our lives," and then, more quietly, "and Anna's life, too."

The adults in the room arched their eyebrows, and the children all leaned forward, elbows on the dinner table. I would have to explain our Peculiar ruse to them. I hoped that Brutus and his wife would agree with me that trying to take up that ruse again was not a good idea.

After I had explained the ruse, with young Tilly chiming in from time to time to add her own updates to what she preferred to call '*our game*,' as if it were merely all in good fun, I added that our Farmer Brown had told me that he thought I could likely pass up in New York, but that I was not sure if it would work, even up there, and waited for their opinions. Those opinions were not at all what I had expected.

“I think it could work,” started Brutus, a bit hesitantly, “if,” he tilted his head to the side, looking from me, to Tilly, to his wife, who nodded, and then continuing with, “you get up past Philadelphia, which, in fact, is not so very far from New York City.”

He leaned back in his chair, tapping his chin in concentration while I sputtered in consternation. This was encouraging our already overly ambitious young Tilly, who had already begun nodding her head, vibrating in such excitement that she hopped off of her chair. That was too much for me:

“But surely you can’t agree with this,” I had pleaded, looking to Henrietta for help, “really. It didn’t work before, and they will know that we might try it again, thanks to that woman at the tavern, now, so we can’t do it again.”

I was flabbergasted when Brutus replied. But not by his opinion of whether or not to take up our ruse again. It was because of the almost comical look on his face, followed by his next words.

“Anna, your particular friend, I believe” he looked at me, raising his eyebrows, then finished, “seems to think that you should try.”

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Chapter 36

I nearly leapt out of my chair.

Anna!

How had Brutus gotten such an idea? Had he spoken with her, himself? And why mark the phrase Particular Friend, which was quite normal for a close friendship, but not normal, at all, on his lips?

It was Anna's lips that I was thinking of, now. I put away the thought, and hoped I was not blushing. Both adults were watching me closely. My little Tilly seemed to have let the cat out of the bag with her impish grin.

I tried to regain my composure:

"So, she does, does she?" I stuttered, finally choking out the question, "does she remember what happened at the tavern," and then I understood.

"Wait, how did you-"

"She's here."

I blinked. *Here?* Had I had heard correctly? I sat forward on my chair, my arms out, elbows bent, as if holding a tray of biscuits, and dropping it. That couldn't be right.

"She-"

I didn't have time to get my question out before I heard:

"She's here."

This time Brutus had spoken. They both looked up at the stairs, and then back at me. Then, they both smiled.

While I was rising from my seat, little Tilly had already sprung out of her chair, raced up the stairs, and was presently stomping down a hallway. *How did she know where to go?* When could Anna have gotten here, and how had I not seen her?

"Just how long has she been here, and-"

"We do have more than one set of stairs, you know."

Brutus was grinning like a man who'd escaped from the lunatic asylum. My questions were all swept aside by the voice of young Tilly reverberating off the walls:

“Annaaaaa!!”

Both parents and all of the children burst in to gales of laughter. Two of the children fell out of their chairs and rolled along the floor in gales of merriment as if they’d seen old Saint Nick.

I looked up toward the source of that delighted cry, and heard two sets of footsteps above us. At last, I saw her.

“Anna.”

I ran up the stairs, just as little Tilly had done, no longer caring about the eyes that might be upon us. I flew into a waiting pair of arms.

Anna was back!

I could hardly believe my eyes. I sat her next to me, young Tilly sitting on her other side, both of us hugging her. Brutus cleared his throat, and his wife offered a hot plate of food for Anna. Neither Tilly nor I wanted to let her go, but we relented. We finished eating in the silence of angels. With her company, manna from heaven could not have tasted better.

Later, she told us of her travels from our tiny bush arbor, her contact with the Porter in a town which she would not name, but that seemed to be a bit north of this one, and of how she had heard of Smith's setting the fire. That was how she had known to come here.

She had lain low, not daring to approach any of the people of this town until after Smith and his men had left. She agreed that his scouts, and other hired men, too, would be about, as spies. She had also heard news about that woman from the tavern.

"She does not own that tavern any more, if ever she did."

Brutus had gotten word about the tavern, too.

"Oh?" Anna had raised an eyebrow at him, waiting to hear more.

"Seems she got bought out, lock, stock and barrel, by one of the Virginia senators, and that mangy cur Smith has been installed there, close by."

While he sounded angry, somehow, Brutus did not sound very worried. *I know I am.* We did not have the luxury of resting very long. Anna seemed to be of the same mind, for she abruptly stood up:

"We must go, soon."

"How soon," I asked, fearing the worst.

"Tomorrow," she said, "maybe even tonight, which would be better, in fact."

I sighed. *She's right, of course.* Thinking over what provisions I had already managed to pack, I thought we could make do. I nodded. Tilly and I were both well fed, healthy, and prepared for the journey, even if we had not expected to leave quite so soon. I had hoped we could stay in this house this night. A bath before leaving would be welcome. I wondered how long it would be before any of us could next have a bath. *Take care in making wishes, for they often come true.*

We triple checked our saddlebags. Brutus lent young Tilly the smallest horse the family had, a small gelding that was good with the children. It was their favorite. When I tried to object to taking their favorite horse, Brutus reassured me.

"We will look to get him back as a carriage horse, don't you worry about it. The Porters along the way will return him after they introduce you to your next Conductor."

Our journey was to be a simple one, with a porter in a town off the main road which Anna knew well, who would lead us to one of the Conductors in that town. It seemed that Brutus had anticipated this Departure, and sent word ahead. We would fall back upon our old ruse if need be, expecting it more likely to work this time, in no small part due to the number of well-wishers and even of white citizens who simply detested being manipulated by Southern slave holding interests. They would look the other way even if they did not really believe our ruse.

Buoyed by all of the support, planning, and good food we had shared, the three of us left the house after the children had scouted the area for about five miles around. They reported all quiet, then went to bed. Anna also made her own search of part of the route ahead.

We left, escorted by Brutus, who had also sent two Porters to check road and paths, while he scouted through the woods as Anna was doing her search, and Tilly and I rechecked our saddlebags and our story. During those early morning hours as I looked back at the house for the last time, I prayed that these children might finish growing up in a world where the risks that their parents took were no longer necessary.

***

Chapter 37

Anna had only told us that we were to cut across country so as to be as sure as we could to avoid the roads, and thus not making it easy for Smith to find us. If he obeyed the Pennsylvania court's order to remove his dogs, then it would be at least a week, she had estimated, in agreement with other estimates, before Smith could return to Shrewsbury to continue his search for us. Brutus had agreed.

The most reliable information that we had put eyewitnesses watching the man and his cronies loading their dogs into wagons and following the road back down south, having been confirmed at several places in Maryland by the lookouts. They wired telegrams to one another for the express purpose of keeping as many eyes as possible on such a threat to the entire network in this part of the eastern seaboard. And to think that only a few short months ago, I had had no idea what the eastern seaboard might be. Now, I was traversing half of it, with two other intrepid souls who had become very dear to me.

"We are about half way there."

Anna allowed a short rest, but no fire. She had a short look around, and came back to tell us that all seemed well. I began to hope, when I was reminded, again, never count chickens before they are hatched. What had reminded me was the sound of a gunshot.

I saw Tilly's gelding bolt, dimly as through a broken mirror. Anna seemed to miss the reins as they passed her. Tilly was riding between us, with Anna in the lead, Old Mary and I bringing up the rear.

As I watched Anna reach for the bridle of young Tilly's gelding, Old Mary stumbled, falling to the ground in a tangle of legs and saddlebags.

Old Mary had been shot.

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Chapter 38

I fell, for the third time, from Old Mary. Our precious satchel, slung over my shoulder, had dragged me down like a millstone. It was that old leather satchel which carried our money and most of our papers. Anna had *Joe Wright's* hack license and some other papers.

The idea of wrapping cloth around my satchel had been to leave my right hand free to manage the reins. Now, though, those bindings proved more of a hindrance, unbalancing me as I fell with Old Mary. The cowards had shot her, rather than me.

Our plan had been to keep to the woods. There was surely more to the plan than that, but I'd refrained from asking. Anna still had Captain, like Old Mary, on loan from some 'friends of our Cause,' as she had put it, who made their contribution to the endeavor by training horses and lending them to Porters, and sometimes even to trusted fugitives, like ourselves.

From remarks that Brutus had made about Old Mary's training, she was famous, as Captain must also be. Now, she was not moving.

I fell to the left side, our precious leather satchel nearly choking me now. It had come out of the cloth wrappings in which I had tried ineptly to bind it to my side, and the strap around my neck was wedged tightly under something.

The sun was not fully up yet, and I had to feel around to get my footing, then release the pressure on my neck. *We have to save Old Mary!* I had just gotten to my feet when a man materialized out of the darkness. As he approached us, Anna appeared at my side, holding a large stick. Neither Captain, nor Tilly's gelding, nor Tilly, seemed anywhere nearby.

The man looked us both up and down, his face breaking into a vile grin, like a Jack o'lantern. He was carrying a long gun, which he slung up and around, resting it across the back of his neck and shoulders. He leaned his head back, as if the weapon were no more than a long pillow.

"Two birds with one stone," his leer deepened, mouth falling open, and he yelled, "Happy New Year, whores!"

Now I recognized him as one of Smith's right hand men, the one who usually did the whipping, which we were all required to watch. That meant Smith himself was not likely to be far. When I heard a cart rolling near, and the sound of hooves, my stomach begin to churn. My guess had just been confirmed. There stood Smith.

Anna put her lips to my ear, suddenly, whispering, "Act like you don't know me."

Then, she stepped over Old Mary, leaned her stick against Old Mary, and pulled a paper from her own satchel, which hung straight down from her left shoulder, and opened it up, as if holding it up for the men to see, in spite of the pre-dawn gloom, saying,

“I am Miss Mary Hawkins, a free born resident of the state of Delaware,” folding the paper while both men looked at one another. They began to laugh. She pulled another paper from her satchel.

"Ahem."

She held it out, still folded, raising her voice over the cackle of the two overseers:

“Furthermore, *gentlemen*,” she gave them a cold smile, “I can assure you that this gal is no whore, for she is my newly acquired property.”

That one took the cake. Both men stopped laughing, their jaws now hanging open. I was shocked, too.

“Uh, Missus?”

I tapped her on the shoulder until she rounded on me, “What now?!”

“But, respectfully, Mistress, how can you be my owner if I have never seen you in my entire life?”

Then Anna waved the still folded paper in my face, saying,

"I bought you, gal, did I not just tell these gentlemen," and she looked back at them. Both men began to laugh. She ignored them, turning back to me and raising her voice to continue, "right before we set out with Ned," her voice had risen to a shout, as if this mysterious Ned were close at hand, and had just stepped aside to relieve himself in the bushes.

Where are Tilly and our other horses? I hoped that Anna had managed to hide the three of them well. She always had a backup plan, or two, for situations like this. We had need of her habit, right now.

She currently looked entirely unconcerned about anything except her wounded pride, it would seem, by the expression of outrage spreading across her face at the moment. *She would make a marvelous theater performer, if colored women were allowed to be actresses.* Not everyone seemed to agree with my assessment, though.

The two overseers were now laughing so hard they looked like a pair of drunkards, slapping each other on the back. They were clearly not concerned that either Anna or I would try to escape. And, just as clearly, not believing a word that Anna had said. She actually managed to sound angry about it, shouting:

"Just you come over here and read this bill of sale, I pray you. It is signed and valid just yesterday. Read it!"

Smith looked at me, as though he'd forgotten all about Anna, wiped his face with the back of his hand, blew his nose on his sleeve, and surged forward. Anna stood directly in his path. She did not retreat an inch.

"Read this." She held out the folded paper to him.

"You ain't no free issue, gal," and at her insistent flap of the papers toward him, he turned back to his companion, ordering him to, "bring me a -"

Then he had stopped cold. His companion was rigid, his hands in the air, looking down the barrel of a gun held by another white man. A colored man pointed a gun at Smith, whose face fell.

"Now, we got legal rights, here, to collect these two gals, and-"

"I heard the lady say that she was born free, from Delaware, was it, ma'am?"

The white man had looked at Anna, who nodded in confirmation. He then looked back at Smith, continuing, "I also heard the lady say that she owns this here gal you all seem to be trying to steal."

Smith burst out "she's a lying -"

The other man shouted over him, demanding,

“Did you read those papers she showed you?”

As Smith’s jaw dropped again this night, more men arrived, some holding guns.

“Now look here. You got no right!”

The white man glared at Smith, then walked up to Anna, taking his hat off respectfully and nodded,

“Would you mind if I took a gander at that paper, ma’am?”

She nodded and handed it over to him. One of the newcomers approached with a nod to Anna, and held a torch close enough for him to open and look at the paper. He looked up at Anna, then Smith, saying,

“It’s like the lady says. Read it for yourself, like the lady done asked you already.”

He had pushed it in Smith’s face, the man with the torch moving it slightly so that Smith should have enough light to read by. The overseer frowned over the paper for a moment, shaking his head.

I held my breath as we all watched him.

Smith straightened up, shoved the paper away, and spat at the man's feet before turning on his heel. He walked back to his right hand man, spitting again on the ground behind him while all guns were finally lowered.

"Let's go. These damned Yankees are all liars anyway."

No one bothered to mention that Delaware being a slave state, its residents could not be Yankees, but we had more pressing needs to attend to, like Old Mary. Once the two overseers were out of sight, two of the newcomers nodded to a third, and slowly walked off in the same direction. I assumed that they meant to follow Smith and see what he would do next. *Old Mary!* I hoped she was not yet beyond saving.

By the time I found her, others had already checked on Old Mary, and were shaking their heads. Anna bent down with me, tears in her eyes. She hugged me as I began to cry. We stayed like that for a moment, and then I thought to ask after young Tilly and our other horses.

"They are safe," Anna had assured me. "I hid them, further up."

The new arrivals escorted us along the road. Anna explained, as we walked, how she had taken Tilly's reins, spurring both horses on faster, rather than catching the bolting gelding. That gunshot fired by Smith had been heard by local lookouts. They had met up with the lookout that Anna was to meet with in advance of our arrival at our destination, who had raised the alarm.

I recalled how Brutus had explained that the colored neighbors in Shrewsbury were on guard, especially since the late unpleasantness with Smith. Some white citizens also, known to be sympathetic to the plight of my fellow fugitives, had joined in the work, helping to keep watch. More importantly, white residents feared for the safety of their own children, and for the virtue of their wives and daughters. Beasts, whether they went upon four legs or upon two, might attack anyone at all.

The noise made by Smith, and the delaying tactics of Anna, allowed everyone to be prepared, as the safe house where we were to stay had already been waiting in readiness for our arrival. Now, both of the Conductors ahead and behind us had been warned of the likely return of the Senator's men, in greater numbers. We all knew that it was unwise to let our guard down, for be back, they surely would. Of this I had no doubt, but I hoped that it would not be soon, at least. I only wished for a bath to soak in while I mourned poor Old Mary.

I had known as soon as I saw Anna's face. My wonderful companion in travel, who had saved me when I fell, and kept us company when Tilly and I hid in that tiny sapling shelter, had died. Before we could even touch her in comfort, or ease her passing. She had died as we stood holding off the man who had shot her out from under me, her pains unnoticed while we tended to our own worries.

"I am so sorry, dear Old Mary. You deserved better than that."

I had spoken into the steam of my bath, hoping that she could hear me, somehow. Our hosts had been exceedingly gracious, three hot baths waiting for us when we arrived. Tilly rode her gelding, while Anna and I rode Captain.

Even Captain seemed to be mourning Old Mary, and it was no wonder. The two horses had spent enough time together to, at the very least, know and be comfortable moving quickly through dense forest, sleeping together, even flattening to the ground and then backing away as one unit. Our encounter with that poor bear, before we had met Dr. H. and his wife, or young Tilly, seemed a lifetime ago now.

I asked, knowing that it had already been done, but wanting to be sure, that someone send a messenger to Brutus' so that his network of informants would know about Smith, to pass the word down further south, and also about Old Mary, to honor the courage and kindness of that brave mare.

'Be *careful* what you wish for,' the Senator had growled at me one day, and then, changing both his tone, and apparently his mood, as he did so often, pivoted on his heel, facing the far end of the wall, then strode over and across to the far end, and announced, "Aesop," tapping the spine of a book and then turning back, giving, me a long stare that had sent waves of icy dread down my spine despite the warm summer day, before leaving the room. The slam of that library door still rang in my ears, across the months and miles. I had wished for a bath, and now, I was getting my wish. We were each to have a bath, alright, but not to bathe in happiness. We tried to wash away the grit, blood, and sorrow of this night.

After our baths, we had taken a light breakfast with the family in the house where we were to be hosted that day, hidden away in a specially built room that someone had called a *priest hole*, and tucked into one large bed. The three of us were clean, and fed. We cried ourselves to sleep all together, little Tilly cradled in each of our arms between Anna and myself, mourning Old Mary.

We awoke to see the day nearly gone, having forgotten how short the days are in early January. We ate supper with the Porter who was to take us to yet a different house. Our horses had already been moved, as part of the day's routine activities, so that all would appear as normal as possible. The meal, though filling, was eaten in sorrow. For many, Old Mary was a horse with special training, but for us, she was a special friend.

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Chapter 39

“I grow tired of your mewling, Smith.”

A mouser from the kitchens could do the work better than this fool. He lit a cigar, then leaned back in his chair to hear the rest of Smith’s report. *No more cigars or drinks for this one.* He had been too kind to his head overseer, gotten overly familiar, and it had gone to the fool’s head.

Smith shuffled his feet, clearly uncomfortable. *Good.* He kept Smith standing as he waited for the rest of his report. Smith finally got the hint, cleared his throat, and continued with his whining:

“These damn Yankees got some nerve,” the man complained, “hazardous, too, them jackasses holding guns on me.”

The Senator had very nearly informed Smith that he was also a jackass, but Smith was the only man in his employ capable of handling the dogs. When this was all over, and he had her back, he would have to find himself a new head overseer. This one clearly could no longer hold his liquor.

“And then,” the fool had finally ceased to babble when the Senator cleared his throat. Smith swallowed, “Senator, sir-”

“Smith, why is your hat still on your head?”

The fool's mouth had fallen open, and then he had reached up, groping for the hat as if he'd forgotten where he'd left his head. He snatched the hat down, face reddening to the stubble on his growing beard.

"Close your mouth, Smith, before a fly goes in it."

Smith's jaw snapped shut, while the Senator remembered that there could hardly be any flies about this time of year. But that was beside the point. If these damned Yankees were so bold as to defy the federal law he had worked so hard to pass, then they would damned well suffer the consequences. The law was on his side, by God, and he would be damned if he would sit around and allow his property to be carried off under his nose. No sir. *This will not stand. Local courts be damned.*

"Smith."

"Yes, sir, Senator, sir?"

"You will go to the nearest saloon, tavern, brothel, or market place, and you will deputize every white man that you see along the way and in the next three establishments," he saw Smith's eyes widen, *Good*, "in the name of the Federal judiciary, for the duty of aiding in the capture of three valuable, and," he looked sharply at Smith, "did you say that gal had a stick in her hand?"

Smith had nodded, letting escape a snort of derision:

“Yes, sir, she-”

“Good,” the Senator smiled, “very good. Then, you deputize as many white men up there as you can find, at least twenty or so, for the acquittal of their legal obligation to aid you in the capture of three dangerous fugitives.”

He looked at Smith, to be sure that the man was following him. Smith had blinked, as though working hard to comprehend what he was hearing.

“Now you make good and sure, Smith, to get no fewer than twenty five men to help you, with their names, and all, you hear me?”

“Yes, sir, Senator, sir.”

“You be sure to take some paper and -no, better yet, be sure to stop off first in some place that has a notary public, and you make sure every man you see gives his name and such, you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” *That should be clear enough even for this imbecile.* It would all be good and legal. At least by day.

“That’s the first thing you are going to do. The second thing, Smith, is that you are going to send one of your boys to get the rest of the dogs.”

Smith’s face had a stricken look. *What has this fool done now?*

“What is it, now, Smith?”

Smith had turned red under the Senator’s glare, and began to mumble something.

“Well?”

“Sir, well, sir, they told us that them dogs was illegal up here, and so I thought-”

“You thought wrong, Smith!”

The Senator banged a fist on the desk.

Smith blanched, taking a step back.

“Now, you get them dogs, and your boys,” the Senator hefted his cane, “and you tell your boys to take those dogs and hide themselves but good up there, out in the woods. You hire some more, if need be, and make sure every one of them boys has a gun, too.”

“Yes, Senator.”

Smith had hesitated, some strange look on the man’s face.

“Well, Smith, are my orders not clear?”

“Yes, sir, Senator, they are clear, but, well, sir, I am sorry to ask this, sir, but how am I to pay my boys?”

The Senator brought his glass of whiskey down to the desk with a crash, spilling the drink across papers. He rifled through the drawers until he found it. *There you are.* The tavern keeper’s cash box. He opened it, spilling the contents out into a purse, and tossed it at Smith.

The man ducked, then retrieved the purse. Loving could meet with Smith to do the necessary accounting. The books were of no concern to a gentleman of the Senator’s rank.

“You are dismissed, Smith.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Smith had bowed, turned, and walked through the open door, waiting, the Senator noted with satisfaction, until he was through the door to put his hat back on. *Good*. The man was learning. Maybe he wouldn’t have to find a new overseer, after all. Good help was hard to find, after all.

A knock came at the door. Loving stepped in, looking more nervous than usual. What was wrong with the man? Ever since he had reported the answer from Price. The climber refused to allow Smith to direct Price’s dogs and search boys.

“What is it, Loving?”

“Sir, it’s Price.”

What had that Climber done now?

“He says, Senator, that the house fire in which his hired hands have been implicated is the fault of Smith and his men, sir, and -”

The Senator jumped up from his chair, cigar flying out of one hand, what was left of his drink spilling on the other.

“How dare that climber accuse my boys of anything!”

Loving had backed up a step, even more pale than before. The Senator glared at him. He’d expected it would be easy to blame that fire on Price’s boys, but it was of no matter. No one could prove that Smith’s boys had been anywhere in the area at the time, anyway. One less Yankee lover was one less negro stealer to worry about. As no one had died, it was a moot point.

He looked back at Loving, waiting for the rest of the news. *Now what?*

“Something more, Loving?”

“I’m afraid so, Senator.”

The Senator sighed, sitting back down in his desk chair, pouring himself another whiskey. He looked back up at Loving.

“What else, man, what else?”

“Well, sir, Price sent a telegram to his man, with instructions to inform you that this search has grown too costly for him, as he does not believe that his gal can easily be recovered, and so he intends to call off his boys, and to continue to rely only on the postings that he has taken out in the various papers to which he is a subscriber-”

This was too much. The Senator stood up again, pacing around his desk to stand in front of the fire. How dare this speculator defy his Betters? How dare Price try to lay the blame on him for the fire at that damned Yankee lover's place! Who was to say that it was Smith's boys?

"Loving."

"Yes, Senator?"

"You send another telegram to Price, and you tell him that he is to take his men, and he is to meet us on the way to that den of iniquity," he noticed Loving lift his eyebrows, and clarified: "the city of Philadelphia. He is to make all haste, with every man, gun, and dog,"

The fool looked surprised, "yes, *dog*, at his disposal. We will get back my property!"

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

"Senator?"

"What now, Loving?"

“My search for that carriage owner finally led me to the owner of that young child-”

“That dark pickaninny this woman said was here with them?”

Loving must be referring to the one who was trying to play body servant to his Ann that night.

“Yes, Senator, that one. I have found her owner, and invited him to take part in this joint endeavor, as you ordered, sir.”

The Senator nodded, and Loving continued:

“I explained very thoroughly that we would be most well equipped, bringing every weapon in our considerable arsenal to bear upon those thieves.”

The Senator nodded again, pleased.

Loving paused:

“But I have had a telegram back, in reply, from him, sir.”

The Senator pursed his thin lips, waiting.

“I sent him a second telegram, Senator, to be sure that I had been clear. It noted that our hired men, especially in conjunction with the men of Mr. Price, would be able to make a very quick and sure job of this search.”

Loving swallowed again.

“But he seems to be set, Sir, and unwilling to hear reason.”

The Senator watched Loving’s Adam's apple bob up and down, almost sure that he’d seen a drop of sweat on the pale man’s face as he cleared his slender throat again.

“Senator, sir, I had a final telegram, stating quite firmly, that he, with his utmost compliments to the Senator, while certain of the success of your endeavor in reclaiming your property, sir,” Loving’s voice cracked, “feels himself to be in possession of methods more efficient to the recovery of his property. He gives his thanks for your kind offer of assistance, Senator.”

The Senator snorted, turning his back to Loving to spit in the fireplace. Another one. Nothing to be done for that one. *Methods more efficient.* He’d show that fool what his methods were. What else could be expected from a man who lived up in Washington County? Why, they didn’t have a senator, not even a representative in the House. That one he could leave well enough alone. He had enough to make do.

He turned to Loving, recalling some orders he had meant to give to Smith, before that fool’s incompetence had caused him to lose his train of thought.

“Loving.”

“Yes, Senator.”

“Smith is away on my orders, and may not be back for some time,” he paused to pour a new glass of whiskey, “so I must charge you with a few orders that he would normally attend to.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Loving, you will see to it that the body of that old mulatto Fancy gal, Mary, I believe,” he shrugged, “is prominently displayed.”

He actually saw the man blanch. Was he about to have a fainting spell? *How womanish.* He grimaced at his secretary, who finally recovered his composure.

“Where, sir, shall I have her displayed?”

Was it his imagination, or had the Senator detected a hint of disapproval on that last word? He looked sharply into the man’s face, seeing only a green about the gills look, like a man who couldn’t hold his liquor. If he didn’t know that his personal secretary didn’t touch the stuff, he’d have sworn the man was inebriated.

His frown deepened.

“Be a man, Loving, and deal with this matter. I do not care where, just make sure it is done. And see to it that the darkies Smith brought up here are all there, to bear witness to her crimes.”

He glared in disgust. If the man were not so efficient with keeping all of the Senator’s accounts in order, he would have considered dismissing him on the spot. But he needed this fool of a broom stick that called himself a Southern man. And one of his constituents, no less. *How does he even call himself a Virginian?* He shook his head, then remembered something.

“Oh, and Loving,” he drawled out slowly, trying to recall which of the house servants were her friends, but failing.

“Yes, Senator?”

“Tell Smith to have them bring up three more of those darkies from the mansion.”

“Which ones, Sir?”

Damnation, did he have to do all of the thinking? Where was his reliable old war horse, that Southern man who had been his faithful personal secretary all of these years?

“I do not know, Loving,” he snapped, “does it really matter, after all? Just choose three from the house, and have them sent up here.” He took another sip of his whiskey. “Any three that are due for a whipping will suffice, man. Just see to it.”

The fool really looked like he was going to be ill, now, damn him.

"Get out, Loving, now."

Loving had bowed stiffly, and wheeled about, when the Senator recalled something.

"Wait."

"Yes, Senator?"

"Find me one of these colored bounty hunters."

Loving had looked confused.

Do I have to spell it out? "Those free issue negro boys who work with white men to catch absconded field hands."

"Yes, Senator."

"And then, you tell them darkies that there is a good reward on the head of that dark skinned pickaninny. Have them find her and take her to Smith, to put with the rest of the darkies from the mansion."

For just a second the Senator thought he saw the oddest look pass over Loving's face, but then it was gone.

Loving bowed, pivoted, and left, his hat under his arm like a soldier. *He's no soldier by Virginia standards.* A good stint at VMI might have done the man a world of good, in the Senator's opinion. He lit another cigar, his old stub forgotten on the floor. He took a sip of whiskey, *about time to have Loving get some more brought up.*

A knock on the door brought his personal secretary back into the office, again.

"Just in time, Loving, just in time."

His man looked confused. The Senator decided to be magnanimous, and enlighten him. "We are living in good times, Loving."

Loving blinked, "Sir? I don't quite take your meaning."

"Damn it, man, what is wrong with you?"

"Senator?"

“What is it, no, wait, first, have them bring up some more of this fine whiskey of mine from Virginia, Loving.”

“Yes, sir.”

The fool was writing a note on that infernal paper he always carried about. He wanted it done already.

“Now, Loving. Personally.”

The man had stood there looking like a slack-jawed fool for a moment, briefly reminding him of Smith, before turning to dash out the door, a mumbled

“Yes, sir,” drifting back in his wake.

Ah, finally. He could see that being away from The Commonwealth was having a deleterious effect on all concerned. *I must get these weak-minded men to be about their business and get us back home.* Back to Old Virginia.

Loving poked his head back in.

“Come in, Loving, come in. What is it, now?”

“Senator, I need to advise you of a few matters of urgency, regarding your holdings, sir.”

“Which of my holdings, Loving? I have four plantations.”

“Yes, sir.”

Why was the man looking down at his shoes, for God’s sake? Nothing could possibly be that bad.

“Speak, man!”

“Well, Senator, there is a problem with your credit, sir.”

“What do you mean, a problem with my credit. It that not why I employ you, Loving, to see to it that I do not have problems with my credit?”

“Well, Senator, I did,” he stuttered, “well, your creditors are becoming rather upset, sir.”

What was this all about? The Senator put his drink down, looking carefully at Loving, nodding for him to continue.

“They say that they cannot extend you any more time for your payments, due to certain irregularities in your affairs, sir.”

“In my affairs?”

“It’s the article in the paper, you see. The one about the fire,” Loving had pulled out the local rag, placing it on the desk, “Price has said that it was not his fault, nor that of anyone under his employ, and that your men, led by Mr. Smith, were also there at the time of the fire. The house was insured, of course, and the investigators have been making all sorts of inquiries all over both states, regarding Mr. Smith, sir.”

It was clearly time to dismiss him. The fool had become a liability to his operations. That was the only explanation for these so called credit problems. It was that fool, Smith. Loving cleared his throat, looking even more nervous.

“What else, Loving?”

“Well, Senator, the New York Life insurance adjuster, in regards to your mill claim, the one you had me put in on the house servant who died after, well, who died, “ Loving coughed, “the adjuster has been threatening to reject that claim, sir, on the basis of that particular slave never having been listed, previously, as a mill worker, until the day before she died.”

The Senator bit through his cigar, grinding his teeth. Loving continued:

“The adjuster says it is most irregular, sir.”

“I do not give a damn what that adjuster says is regular or not. How, exactly, would anyone from New York know what was regular any damned way? You just get it taken care of.”

“Yes sir.”

Loving bowed and left.

Damned if this one wasn’t starting to become almost as useless as that fool Smith. The Senator went back to thinking about home, warm weather, and his Fancies, until another knock came at the door. This time it was one of the new house darkies, bought here in Maryland to attend him in this tavern.

“What is it?”

“Master, Senator, sir, it’s Master Loving, sir.”

The bowed head of this new darkie seemed to be trembling, just the slightest bit. *What in Yankee Hell has happened now?* Did he have to supervise every little detail here?

“Now what does he need, boy?”

“Well, master, he fainted, Sir.”

The Senator’s head snapped up sharply, staring at the dark head, still bowed.

“He what? Whatever for, what happened?”

“Well, master, seems he was ill,” and then the boy hesitated, “got real sick-”

Not something catching, the Senator suddenly worried.

“Sick, sick how, boy, what was it, Yellow Fever, the pox, cholera, what?”

“Don’t know, master, he just saw her, and then got real sick, real sudden like.”

“Saw who?”

The Senator was beginning to have a sneaking suspicion.

“When he saw the body of that house gal they brung up here, master Senator.”

Damn his hide, that Loving! The fool had gone and gotten himself sick at the slightest hint of one little damned dead darkie! He would skin the man alive for making him look the fool.

“You tell him to come here, right now!”

His whiskey glass shattered just above the spot on the door jamb where the boy’s head had been, moments earlier.

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Chapter 40

"She went that way…"

I need a better hiding place.

I had eaten sparingly these past days. All three of us had, despite the lady of the house urging us to eat. We knew not how the fortunes of the journey ahead might treat us, and whether food would be easily had, after this resting place. I knew not even the name of this town. It was as if the townsmen were afraid to speak, lest a similar fate befall them.

I began to hear shouts in the direction that Anna had retreated.

I ducked lower.

Shrewsbury. The name of that town would forever be linked with blood. A town of double loss. We kept to the woods. Nowhere would we be safe, we had been told, until we got to the city of Philadelphia.

That great city, they told me, had once served as the capital of this nation, before the Federal City was built. Now, it seemed that this city, like Boston, was committed to the cause of the Abolition of the condition of servitude. In all of these United States.

We were told that here was a place where we would be sheltered, protected, and given aid and guidance to further our journey North up to Canada. I had tried to trust in what I was being told.

But, as it turned out, it was not true.

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Chapter 41

“ Mr. Loving, sir?”

“Yes?”

“The Senator wants to see you right away, sir.”

Loving? What was he doing up here?

We had received warnings, before leaving our last safe house, to exercise even greater caution, trusting no one. Impoverished Southerners, and even Northerners, had joined the usual assortment of overseers and bounty hunters seeking the rewards for our capture. The Senator’s personal secretary, however, should not be among them.

I shuffled further into the corner, chasing the retreating shadow. This was certainly not what I had expected, when we’d finally arrived here.

Dr. H. was pursuing an action at law against the Senator for the burning of his home. The papers reported that the Senator was blaming Price. As we practiced our reading together, we had wondered whether Price and the Senator were really at odds, or if it was all just for show. We thought this would keep them too busy to send men here. We were clearly wrong.

I decided to find a better hiding spot. I scuttled over to a wagon, closer to where I thought Anna had hidden. Another mistake.

I spotted Anna, then saw her eyes go wide. She waved at me to hide, while she ducked back behind a cart. I ducked behind the wagon, just in time. Footsteps approached from around the corner. Then it was my eyes that went wide with shock. I heard men's voices calling to one another:

"She went that way! I saw her with my own two eyes, right there, I tell you. It was that freckled mulatto gal, Weems, the one Mr. Price been posting them ads for."

I heard a clink of coins being jangled together. Before I could think of anything, I heard more voices.

"I told you it was her. Didn't I tell you?"

"Yeah, you told me alright, and I seen her for myself, too. I'll go tell Mr. Price. You stay here and keep watch, in case she comes back this way."

"I'll stay here alright. All this run'in around makes a man thirsty. Mighty thirsty."

"Don't you go in that tavern, you hear, you stay put until I come back with more men."

“Well, hold on, now, I ain’t been paid. Ain’t even seen Smith in I don’t know how long.”

“You just do what I told you. I’ll deal with Smith. Said he’d pay us soon’s he got this Senator’s Fancy gal.”

“Well, now come on, now, that ain’t right.”

“You stay here, and be on the lookout for that gal.”

Had I heard that right? The Senator, not paying his hired men? *How could that be possible?* More footsteps passed. Then, silence. No one seemed to be about. Perhaps the lure of the tavern had been too great, after all, but then, what did he use to pay for his drink if he’d not been paid? I was about to stand up when footsteps arrived. I crouched down further.

A second set of footsteps scampered near, then stopped:

“Yes, Sam?”

“Master Loving, sir, the Senator wishes to know whether you have raised the display yet, sir.”

What?! Here? Now?

"Tell," something hit the ground as Loving's voice seemed to crack, oddly. He spoke, again: "tell the Senator that I am having it taken care of as we speak."

The small feet ran off, carrying Loving's reply to the Senator. Loving's feet did not move for a long while. At last he walked quickly around the corner, but not terribly far, for I could heard the sounds of a man heaving up his latest meal. What had him so ill? Not drink. He was rumored to be the only man south of the Mason-Dixon Line who did not drink, a thing for which many held in him deep suspicion.

The retching finally stopped, and the sound of scuffing feet, as if trying to wipe vomit off the soles of his shoes. Then his footsteps died away, as if he'd been walking quickly down the street. A rat crossed the street just inches from my toes, and I pulled my bonnet down over my face, keeping me from yelping. It also made my face less visible. But one face was visible, hanging up by a pulley from a wagon. I had been told to stay in doorways as much as possible, and that was what saved me. I only saw the barest hint of that face, as I hid mine.

It was the face of my poor dear Miss Mary.

Now my own stomach risked emptying itself. A glimpse of that bloated face showed that terrible death she had suffered. I kept my head down, walking quickly, the nausea nearly

overwhelming. I stopped in another doorway, then saw my error. I was across from a tavern. And Loving was standing in front of it.

I crouched down, trying to look like a beggar, watching out of the corner of my eye. A drunkard staggered out of the tavern, stumbling into Loving. Loving took the drunkard by the collar, towing him along back the way he had come. *I'd scowl, too, with that one.* The drunkard was shouting something about payment, the Senator's debts, and working men never able to pay for anything on credit.

Both men stopped, as the drunkard fell to his knees, still shouting about credit. I distinctly heard the words:

"...should sell them fancy whores to a brothel! That would settle up his debts! Them whores all together is worth a pretty penny…"

The shouting continued along these lines until another man arrived to help Loving. They managed to haul him to his feet, swaying back and forth as he blathered about credit, and pay, and Fancy Maids.

He lurched toward Loving and shouted in the poor man's ear: "Hey, Loving, you should come have a drink with Smith and me!"

At this, Loving unwound his arm from under the drunkard's shoulder, and stepped back. The fool fell flat on his face. Loving muttered something about Smith as he walked away, leaving the drunkard to the other man to deal with.

Interesting. I'd always had the feeling that this man detested Smith. Loving always seemed to find a reason to excuse himself from the room when Smith walked in. Something told me that this was a bit of information that I must remember to meditate upon later, for it might be of some use, although how, I did not yet know.

As I made to get up, I checked about me carefully. I also noted that I could no longer feel my feet. Time to leave.

"Get up!"

Smith!

"You as drunk as a skunk!"

The drunkard began to complain loudly. About Loving.

"Can't even hold your liquor."

Smith spat on the man. “Get up off of the ground and haul yourself over to help with the darkies.”

A beggar sat down next to me, and I decided to follow suit. I kept my head down as if I were sleeping, and tried to keep one eye on Smith. I knew he hated Loving. Now, what to do with that? Smith finally moved his man down the street, and disappeared. I wriggled my toes to bring the life back into my feet, glancing at my companion in the doorway. I hoped that this city, whose name was supposed to proclaim brotherly love, would also find room in its heart to feed, warm, and clothe this poor brother.

More rumors came to us about the Senator’s affairs. Our network kept close watch on Smith and Loving. Loving was said to own enough property to be a respected professional man. But he owned no slaves. The Senator’s personal secretary, it seemed, had a pronounced aversion to the South’s Peculiar Institution.

A revelation, or even a rumor of this, could ruin Loving, and maybe damage the Senator. Smith and his men patronized several taverns, fortunately for our side. Loving was from an old Virginia family, and could hardly be expected to pull up his roots for a bit of distaste. We began to consider how to use this information. Offering Loving help to move out of Virginia, was mentioned, as that very thing had been done for Dr. H. Could this be used as another means of weakening the Senator?

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Chapter 42

“The message says that they want you back, Willow.”

Anna looked at me and sighed. “They said, ‘quietly’ because they do not want any legal complications.”

I frowned.

“The truth is that neither these Abolitionists, nor even being up here, can protect us.”

I lowered my head to think, then lifted it again, decided.

“Well, then," I said, “it seems that once again, we must leave.”

Anna looked at me, an eyebrow lifted.

“On our own.” I looked around, then whispered:

“And we must leave at once.”

Anna nodded.

“You may well be right,” she frowned, “but let us think it over again before we rush out. Nothing we do can afford to be done in haste.”

***

Chapter 43

It seemed that someone had just had time to catch a glimpse of our poor little Tilly being tied, a man's hand clamped over the child's mouth, before she was then gagged, and carried off on the man's saddle, riding a horse that no one had seen around the neighborhood before.

What was especially galling to me, being new to this whole business, was that that kidnapper was a colored man.

Anna looked at me, her eyes boring into mine.

"We will get her back."

I knew that she always had emergency arrangements prepared ahead of time, but this circumstance befuddled me.

How would we find young Tilly in a place like this? *So many places to hide.* We had to find these ruffians before they turned her over to the man who considered himself to be her owner.

We played cat and mouse with our pursuers, searching for Tilly while hiding ourselves from nearly everyone. In this dangerous game, we needed all of the information that we could get.

We heard that Price and the Senator both had advertisements for us in the city of Baltimore. This surprised me, but I wished them long and fruitless searching in that port city.

“We have to get her back before she is taken down south.”

Then, as if in reply to my puzzled look, she shook her head. Anna still had that knack for reading my thoughts:

“If he gets her below Maryland, our network will be almost helpless to find her.”

“I want to help,” I pleaded, but she shook her head.

“They are already looking for a petite octoroon with a scar down her left arm,” a grim look upon her face as her eyes fixed upon mine.

Then she mounted Captain and raced off…

***

Chapter 44

“Is she hurt?”

“We don’t think so.”

Anna had narrowly escaped capture, being forced to come back without Tilly. After warning me to stay put, she left. Again.

The weather was sunny and getting warmer, but I felt as if it were still dark and cold. We had no reports whatsoever on the whereabouts of Anna. My sole consolation was the fact that she had not been seen to have been captured. Everyone assured me that if she were captured we would know nearly instantaneously. The grapevine.

“Your very presence here, Miss Berty, is a victory.”

The Station Master at whose home I was staying that day looked me in the eye, as if measuring me.

“How so?”

“Each day you remain out of his hands is a victory over that foul system.”

I must have neglected to hide my trembling, for he took my hands, speaking as if comforting a small child:

“Believe us, you are safe, here.”

His wife rushed to me, wrapping me in a blanket and an embrace.

I knew well what lengths that foul system would go to in order to reclaim us. We three were not safe, despite of all the well-meaning reassurances. I felt powerless. If my dearest Anna was gone, and our young Tilly stolen off to a fate worse than death, what remained for me, here?

The next morning, a message came. For me. *For me?*

“A local abolitionist has requested a visit with you, Miss B.”

His family had taken to calling me this simply to make me more difficult to find.

“Why certainly,” I answered, “but, whatever for?”

“He has volunteered for the task of haunting the taverns that Smith and his men have given themselves over to frequenting. He takes down their words, and thus helps our cause by providing more intelligence on our enemies.”

An uncomfortable blush passed over his face.

“The question is a bit delicate.”

“Whatever I can do to help.”

My stomach began to churn, but I ordered it to be still.

The question was whether I had ever had to attend the Senator at events or, in his rooms. I had.

“Men like Loving or Smith often came to report or to receive orders from the Senator, but, I saw the other overseers only when I was made to attend a punishment of one of my fellows in bondage.”

“We may be able, if you are willing, to make use of what you have seen and heard.”

“Of course. What little I know is in your service.”

Especially if it might help Anna and Tilly. Back in Virginia, my tears for my friends, whipped for my flight, had failed utterly to move my companions in suffering. They seemed to believe me guilty for the pain of our friends. And perhaps they were right. After all, even now, I was still making dangerous mistakes, even deadly for some, like our poor Old Mary.

“We are sure that you know more than you think. Any details of the Senator’s affairs can help us in this struggle.”

I bowed my head, trembling again, ashamed to have to recall those days back in that Old Dominion. The Station Master’s wife took my hands in hers.

“You have been of service to others,” she affirmed. “Brutus told me how you tended to young Tilly, at his home.”

She took my head in her hands, and pulled me into her arms.

”This is a hard thing we are asking of you. I know. But … shhh, shhh, there, now, there…”

She smoothed my hair down as the dam burst. I heard footsteps, as if far off, and she pulled my head to her shoulder, holding me tightly. A door closed somewhere, and I felt ashamed of my weakness. I heard her speaking, as if to a small child.

"You have suffered much, and survived much. You have much to offer."

I shook my head. What could I possibly have to give? She lifted my chin, gently, looking me in the eyes:

"You have. I tell you, truly. I have seen you at your studies, and at your work. You are of value. Think on this. Have you never given any gift, ever? I cannot believe that, from all I know of you."

I nodded, unable to speak.

I recalled my first time being able to give a gift, in the form of that famous slice of bacon to the generous wife of Dr. H. but what, I wondered, had I ever done for Anna?

As I pondered how I could be of use to someone who had made me able to be useful, to myself and to others, I reviewed those things that I had learned so far, since meeting at the side of the President's House. I had learned how to sew, not this foolish embroidery to which I had been restricted all of my life, but garments. Real and useful.

I had learned how to ride a horse, a not unimportant, and for me, impressive, feat, given my size and my life, having been carefully kept indoors, and away from any knowledge that might be useful at all, but especially in getting away from the Senator.

I had also learned how to tend to various kinds of wounds, both of humans and of horses, even while I was learning how to properly groom and care for those same horses.

Most importantly, or perhaps most kindly of all, Henrietta had taught me to cook. Never had I been allowed to stand anywhere nearer to the kitchen than a stray bit of hot grease might pop. Thus, the kitchen was a place of wonder, to me. Only in fleeing my captivity had I at last been able to be allowed to do real work, the work of feeding people. Useful work.

I vowed that one day I would cook for my beloved Anna, proudly serving her a meal cooked entirely by my own hands.

As I thought on it, I began to understand. Everything I had been taught in Virginia had deliberately left me a child in the mind. I now thought I might understand why. It makes one far easier to convince of anything at all, if one is left a child in one's mind. Everything that I had ever been told about myself in Virginia, was a lie.

I worried for our little Tilly, kidnapped by a man who should have been one of our own. Now, I knew that there were ways to achieve the task which was set before us. I refused to give up, for the sake of our little Tilly, and for Anna.

My entire life, I had been taught that, apart from my beauty, I had no value. I now knew this to be a lie. One that was convenient for he who called himself my owner. I was capable of learning useful things. Now I would put all that I had to the service of freedom. Starting with our young Tilly.

I would find a way to help Anna, and to find young Tilly, if it was the last thing I ever did.

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Chapter 45

The morning had broken, clear, sunny, crisp, and very cold. Spring seemed like it would be decades away. Still thinking over some of the disturbing and often contradictory reports that were filtering in about Smith, the Senator, Loving, and even slave trader Charles Price and his men, something was worrying at the corners of my mind.

Several of the many Conductors in this city had sent messages to me in the care of the Station Master where I hid. *They want my thoughts?* I had seen some of these men, as they met with the Senator. It was the first time in my life that my opinion had ever been consulted.

What does Anna would think of all of this? I missed her mischievous smile. She was always thinking far more than she let on. Where could Anna possibly be right now? The good thing was that she almost certainly hadn't been captured. As I pondered these questions, and thought longingly of my precious Anna, I remembered something.

She had been carrying her Free Papers for Joe Wright, and his Maryland hack license, I believed. That meant that there were no papers from Delaware, as she had claimed that terrible night they shot poor Old Mary. So what she had handed over? Why hadn't Smith simply denounced us all on the spot? *Of course.* How had I possibly missed that? *I am a fool.*

Smith, the Senator's head overseer, was entirely unable to read.

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Chapter 46

I was moved by yet another Porter to a new Station. A laundry, where I was to work, or at least pretend to do so. I also intended to make a plan, as Anna always did.

My face was rubbed with coal dust, a work bonnet covering my bound up hair. A large working dress and old cloak covered the rest of me. I was helping to stir the dirty linens, and pondering my plan, as I kept to a dark corner. I remained ready to follow one of my fellow laundresses at the slightest signal. A boy was assigned to watch the door for strangers, constables, and informers.

“You might be better off continuing your journey North alone, Miss B.”

I’d raised an eyebrow, waiting for the other shoe.

“It would be safer for all.”

I refused to leave without any word of the fate of young Tilly, and the whereabouts of Anna. I knew that the one would never stop hoping for us to find her, and the other would never rest until we did.

My plan should work. One thing I'd had plenty of time to do, trapped in that house in Virginia, was to observe. I had seen how those around me reacted, to the Senator, to his visitors, to the overseers, to myself, and to each other. Invisible, as only a piece of decoration can be, I'd watched and listened, even if I spent much of my time trying to forget most of what I'd witnessed. Now, I realized, I must draw upon that which I had tried to throw away.

I knew that Smith was a jealous man, and now I added proud, and unlettered, to the list. Those were faults which my plan must use to our advantage. He must be cut out of the picture, as a spot of mold is cut away from a piece of cheese. There must be some way to encourage, help, trick, or trap him into making a mistake that would remove him.

I hesitated at the idea of plotting a man's death, for I was no murderess, but I had to admit that a deadly bout of over drinking, or accidentally eating a poisonous mushroom, would not go unwelcome. Removing one of the Senator's most trusted men, and one who was a distinct danger, would serve us very well, indeed. But how to help that happen?

The animosity between Smith and Loving must be used to render both unable to move forward in the service of the Senator.

"Ouch!"

Heads lifted from their work and turned in my direction. I raised a hand to apologize, and to show that I was alright, before bending back to my task. *I must be more mindful.* Keeping an eye

on the boiling water, I continued stirring the laundry cauldron. I went back to mulling over how Smith's vices could be used to our benefit.

Cutting him out would make life more difficult for the Senator, at least temporarily. That should make it easier for us to find Tilly, and then I could move further north.

Anna, would surely hear of our progress, and could join us later. But how to make some concrete use of that division between the two servants of this Pharaoh?

"Not paid!"

"Sorry, what was that, Betty?" *Betty?* Oh, yes, my current temporary name, here. "Oh, sorry, Miss Jenny," I had babbled, "just thinking out loud."

"Oh, alright then, but mind your work, do remember, Dearie."

Her voice had been kindly, but stern, and she wasn't wrong. It was dangerous to forget to pay attention in these surroundings. As much for the spies and informers, as for the large vats of boiling laundry.

"Yes, ma'am."

Once it was dark, and everyone had left for the day, I got word that I was wanted for a conference with two Station Masters. They wished to know more about the Senator's operations, and Loving, in particular. I made a note to myself to remember to mention the man's evident dislike of Smith, and to ask after Brutus' wife, while thanking her for teaching me how to judge cheese.

I learned, at that meeting, that in addition to the other actors already known to us, there were a new variety of miscreants active in the city. Some were free men of color in the employ of bounty hunters. The Senator had raised the reward for my capture, and added to those for Tilly and Anna, directing them to be given directly into his custody, by the hand of Smith, here in Philadelphia. Both Station Masters urged me to leave the city at once, but how could I leave young Tilly, and my dear Anna? So I told them of my plan.

"They are already divided, so it may be that all we need to do is simply give them a little push, and that fighting between them can grow into a full scale conflagration."

I saw one Station Master nod, though looking a bit doubtful. I continued.

"Smith is already spending time in the tavern, and his men are already very unhappy here. Is that not so, gentlemen?"

They had both nodded, evidently having heard at least some of the same reports that I had known must be circulating about the rantings of Smith and his men. I could see that these two Station Masters, both accustomed to shepherding their passengers from one short stay to the next,

were not eager to involve themselves in what seemed to be a pointless argument among hired men, but I was sure that there was something larger at stake, here. I tried to explain it as I knew from my years of observing all three of these men.

"The Senator, as he claims, was the key mover in passing this law which so badly affects you now, here up North, is this not so?"

Both men had nodded, as I had known they must agree. Brutus had explained to me that a great many white abolitionists had been angered by the law about which the Senator had boasted so much, which I now knew to be called the Fugitive Slave Act of 1851.

Just four years ago, then, the citizens of even states as far away as New York, or in great cities like Boston, had been affected, and they were angry. So how could it be that a person, myself, who had been privy to the private dealings of the Senator, should not have some idea of how to make good use of this dispute between his men? I had seen how puffed up the Senator, and his man Smith as well, had been. Loving, however, as the Senator's personal secretary, ought to have been even more proud of such an accomplishment. *So, why wasn't he?*

Loving, as the Senator's real right hand man, must have done a great deal of the actual work involved in bringing that abomination to fruition. I explained how any affront to the Senator's good standing affected his relations with the powerful men of Virginia. These, he was always concerned not to offend. At least, not openly. I further explained that if Loving were as angry with the Senator

as I suspected him to be, then he was the perfect tool with which to bring down the Senator, starting with Loving's rival, Smith.

"Which should not be too difficult, seeing as how that drunkard is already doing half the work for us, in the taverns every night."

This comment from one Station Master reassured me. Smith and his discontented men were now in the habit of carousing rather than searching for me. That likely indicated that they had still not been paid. The taverns were merely allowing them to dispose of the credit in the Senator's good name. If we could show, by getting Loving to make some misstep, that this name was no longer good, then the credit would not take long to follow.

My plan to get Loving to admit that the Senator was, in fact, no longer in good standing with his creditors would begin by bringing the two servants together in a public place so that words could be had, heard, and written down. All our men needed to do was to sit in the tavern and help get Smith drunk, which should be no great challenge.

We'd then find a way to lure Loving to the right street, and trip him out in front of the tavern. We would get Smith and his ruffians thrown out at just that moment, running into Loving there.

It should be no great difficulty to either tip one of the servers or merely encourage a local youth to pull some prank that would start a brawl, and get Smith ejected from the tavern, along with his rascals.

"After all, I don't imagine that these men are very well appreciated, even at the best of times," I had observed.

Neither Station Master objected to this idea. They agreed to set the stage and have the audience ready. A show, indeed. A performance on which my freedom and that of many of my fellow bondsmen depended.

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Chapter 47

We put our plan into action. I'd spoken with several who had been taking turns listening at the taverns and following Smith and his men, changing costumes often, I was glad to hear. They told me that they did this especially often when they followed Loving, who tended to be far more solitary, and thus more difficult to follow. Many were young men, boys, even, who found the adventure of this chase both exciting, and a story for their grandchildren, one confided in me.

"You are like unto a damsel in distress."

His gaze upon me made me blush, and we both turned our heads. He had even knelt before me, hat in his hands held over his heart, his red hair clipped so short it was sticking up at all angles on his head. I reproached myself bitterly for not having seen this.

"I am loathe to give offense, but as much as I am honored by your affection, my heart belongs, to another."

This young man seemed both kind and courageous. He took my rejection in good humor, saying:

"Nonetheless, I will ever be you defender, come what may."

"I thank you," I paused, searching for a name: "May I call you Courageous Red?"

His face lit up like the sun, as he scampered out the door.

Because of my training in grooming horses, courtesy of the family of Brutus, I was moved early in the pre-dawn hours to a new Station: a stable. Adding paddock boots to my costume, I tended the horses.

I saw many whom I had met earlier during my stay, coming and going with messages. They always looked relaxed once they crossed the threshold into the stable, as though suddenly free from the weight of vigilance.

One of those messages, to my surprise, a young boy delivered into my own hand, right under the curry comb I was using at that moment, just about mid-day.

The message could only be from a vanishingly small number of people, as most working class women could not read. Few knew that I could. I waited until he left, and then chose a stall with good light, as though going to see to my personal needs. It was a very short note, written in Henrietta's hand, which I recognized from all of her recipes as she had taught me to cook. It said only:

Farmer Brown has betrayed us. Burn this note.

H.

I stood there in shock, glad of the privacy, horrified that this man whom I had thought to be our friend would do such a thing. An entire free family was now at the mercy of a law which not only made their activities illegal, but also punished colored people far more harshly than white citizens. Even worse, *Mr. Brown* knew all of us.

He knew me, he knew young Tilly, he knew Anna, and he knew, or had known, all three of our horses. He had been a stable hand in that home for years, so he could also point out each family member on sight.

As I stood in the stall fighting back tears for the friends who had saved us in Shrewsbury, I head footsteps crossing into the barn. A voice called out my name. Or rather, my newest name.

"Jinny, are you decent?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

I hurried out to make the worker's curtsy. My visitor looked grim. His thin lips were stretched nearly flat, and they were entirely devoid of blood.

"I have bad news, I am afraid."

I could see that, already. And just as I had been starting to have high hopes for our plan, which had begun to bear fruit. Tonight had been fixed as the evening to draw both of the Senator's head men together. Smith was more and more belligerent lately, making it easy to get him thrown out. But these tidings looked like they might change things. I nodded, giving him my full attention.

"I'm afraid that your friend, young Tilly, may be out of our hands."

My eyebrows shot up, and I waited.

"She seems to have been sold."

"Sold?" That made no sense.

"But her former owner has been looking for her. Has he ceased to advertise for her in the papers, then? This makes no sense."

"That is what we thought, too, but her *owner* seems to have renounced all claim to her."

He'd pronounced the word *owner* as if it were an expletive.

"There have been no more postings for her, and now," he had paused to look at me, frowning again, and said, "that Senator from Virginia has had Smith take her away, shutting her up along with his other people under Smith's guard."

The Senator? Bought Tilly? *No. God, please, no!* That could not be. She already had an owner who was searching for her, and that meant that … unless he had found her and was holding her for retrieval?

"Why do you believe that her former owner has renounced all claim to her? Do you mean to say that you have seen a bill of sale for her, in his name, or" God forbid, "was there an auction?"

"No," the man had hastened to say, putting out a reassuring hand, "nothing like that. Certainly not in *this* city," he had added, as though such a commonplace thing, where I was from, were unthinkable here in the North.

"So...?"

"The Senator has been displaying her, rather ... publicly, since yesterday."

The man looked suddenly embarrassed, blushing deeply.

"Displaying?"

I continued to wait for a reply. The other ugly shoe finally dropped.

“He has been displaying her outside of a house of ill repute, promising to *give* her, free of charge, to any man with information on the whereabouts of a certain …” he hesitated, seeming to be unfamiliar with a word, “octoroon?”

“For me.”

I felt nauseous, my knees trembling and my arms aching suddenly, fists clenched as I fought to draw breath and stay on my feet. How dare that foul beast of a man do such a thing to this child. Then it occurred to me:

“But, how can he do that?”

I got another blush in response.

“I mean, without the permission of her owner, how can he do something that would compromise her value later, at auction, or even for a private sale.”

The man looked mildly shocked at my words, but I was merely repeating such things as I had heard nearly my entire life, in Virginia.

“You must forgive me. I had forgotten that this is not a topic of general conversation up here in the North.”

“Is is so, down there?” He turned beet red, now. “I mean to say, down south?”

“Yes, it is,” I had replied. “And rather too often, I am afraid.”

But how had the Senator been able to find Tilly, and why do this to her? We knew that he must have found out we were all together, after that woman had locked us in and called his men to come collect us, while she collected the rewards on our heads. But how had he gotten hold of her?

In the instant that a thought came to me, I knew that it was true. Could I really have any other choice?

“I am very sorry,” then, almost in a murmur, “the poor child.”

I had quite forgotten that this man was still standing there. Perhaps he would know.

“Do we know how she came to be in the clutches of that foul b-, man?”

His eyebrows had risen, hearing me about to call the Senator a beast, but a knowing nod was all that betrayed his thoughts. He heaved a great sigh, as though he were thinking something over.

“We were able, through some accountants who are friends of the cause, to trace her papers, which have been examined,” he added quickly, “and the papers are genuine, or at least they appear so, being properly notarized with the official seal of Virginia,” he paused, and then said, “only to trace the sale to another enterprise in that Commonwealth.”

Then he sighed again.

“And now we also know how she was found, for it seems that this was no accident, I am afraid.”

Of course it was not. Nothing was, with the Senator. I braced my self, waiting to hear what was coming.

“It seems that the child had been tracked down by a certain notorious bounty hunter, and with the help of a formerly enslaved man.”

“But if he has not even been paying Smith and his men, as we have heard, then how has he been able to pay this bounty hunter?”

“On credit, from what we have been able to glean.”

That made sense. I now recalled a long ago discussion between the Senator and Loving. Some of his creditors were demanding that any new purchases be made in coin, others calling for full payment of his debts. Gentlemen were always presumed to be in good standing, and expected to be extended credit for nearly all of their purchases.

"Some of our watchers saw the kidnapping take place, but were unable to stop it." He frowned, and then his face brightened somewhat:

"I know that particular Porter, and I can assure you that he, at least, would have tried, if he could have gotten to the horse in time."

He coughed as I looked down, balling my fists to master my emotions.

"But we did get a good description of the colored man who grabbed her. He's likely working in the employ of the bounty hunter, for whom the set of expenses, including his hire of the man who identified young Tilly, was enumerated as part of the set of transactions listing the child's sale to the Senator."

So that was how they had found the slave catcher who had caught young Tilly. This sounded like the work of Mr. Loving. I heard him ordered to investigate rivals, both political and business related, from time to time. And the slave catcher, if he had found young Tilly, must have had help. Who was this former slave he kept mentioning, though?

“How do you know of this former slave that helped capture Tilly? You seem to be very familiar with that man.”

He frowned, his face falling even further. “We are, or we were, at any rate, sadly.”

“How so?”

“The man was once a friend not only to the cause, but also to some friends of yours, in Shrewsbury. That family has had to leave the state, now, due to this sad business.”

“Wait,” I said, feeling a growing pain in the pit of my stomach, “not the former slave who left that town not long before we ourselves did?”

He had nodded, then hung his head, holding it in one hand, and admitting:

“The same, yes. It seems that he somehow met up with this bounty hunter, whether by accident or of his own free will, we do not know. From the large number of expenses requested for payment, it seems that he gave away quite a lot of information, about many of us, to his employer, for quite some time before Tilly was taken by him.”

That, I realized, explained how the Senator knew that using young Tilly to get to me would be *an effective attention keeping strategy*, a phrase I had heard him use many times before. It would also keep the attention of much of our network of friends in the surrounding states. He could sell a

wealth of information about Brutus. And about Old Mary's training, Captain, and my beloved Anna. This was very bad.

I knew that for the Senator, faking a document with the seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia was a trivial matter. None of this business of a sale by Tilly's owner made sense, given what she had told us, what Anna had surmised, and also the words of Dr. H.

What did make sense, given my knowledge of the Senator's lack of scruples, even for his fellow white property owners, was that he might have faked documents. They might keep until young Tilly's owner finally got word that she was up here, and sent to retrieve her. After that, even the Senator would face serious consequences.

I heard a throat clear. I had forgotten his presence. He'd been telling me about my old acquaintance at the home of Brutus, who was now a traitor, who had given our little Tilly into the hand of the enemy.

"I believe that he was often known as Farmer-"

"Brown."

"Yes," he had acknowledged.

When I realized that this was how our *Farmer Brown* had betrayed us, I knew I could never forgive him.

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Chapter 48

The Station Master had more news for me, as it turned out. I had been moved immediately after I had burned Henrietta's note, going directly from the barn where I had been working, leaving Captain at my old lodging, while being told that young Tilly's gelding was to go to a different stable, in a private home outside of the city. From there, the gelding would be sent in various stages to rejoin the family of Brutus once they were resettled farther north, in a different state.

The betrayal by our *Farmer Brown* was a painful shock to me, but would also harm all of us in a multitude of ways, starting with our ability to trust anyone and any information coming from Maryland. Washington City and County, too. I wondered if those at Mount Zion Church, back in what I now knew to be Georgetown, rather than the Federal City itself, had gotten this sad news. I hoped that those evil slave gaoles, several sitting nearly within site of the President's House, were not even now being filled with my benefactors, people who had helped organizing my own escape from the Senator's clutches. Their entire network must now be in grave danger. Anna and I were also now closer, by the information given over to our enemies by our Mr. Brown, to the grasp of the men whom the law considered to be our legal owners.

I had no way of knowing whether Anna had gotten wind of these recent doings, but I felt that I must find a way to get a message to her. Friends of the cause had heard that there was,

"a game afoot to cast the serpents who worked for some large slaveholders out of our fair city."

This obscure sort of half explanation was intended to prevent any sharing of unnecessary details, especially to those not part of the larger endeavor. I only hoped that these precautions would suffice.

I had decided that removing Smith from the Senator's employ would no longer do, since Tilly was only a pawn as far as the Senator was concerned, in his larger vicious game. It was evident that the first thing I must do was to find a way to get the fact of Tilly's being in the hands of the Senator communicated to the man who was deemed her legal owner, and this must be done as quickly as possible. Short of actually rescuing her from the custody of Smith and his rabid dogs, only that man was capable of saving our poor Tilly, it seemed to me.

I cast about for some other means of removing her from the clutches of that foul beast and the disgusting fate that awaited our poor Tilly should that beast confirm the receipt of valid information on my present location at the hands of any man with the means to find me. The original idea of dividing Smith from Mr. Loving in order to better ruin the interests of the Senator still held some appeal for later, but for now, my priority had to be finding a way to get little Tilly into some safer location.

While it would be running a terrible risk, bringing the man who would surely be seeking after and most desirous to punish young Tilly, it seemed to me that that would be the surest way to prevent her from being given over to an even worse fate. No southern man would consent to the degradation and possible damage to his property, as Tilly being violated would do, unless it was under his authority. Also, adding to the knowledge of the financial problems which the Senator was currently hiding, we hoped to create serious legal problems for the Senator. That should happen,

once the case of the burning of Dr. H's home arrived in some court whose jurisdiction the Senator could not ignore. If a well known slave trader like Charles Price were in open dispute, via the papers, with the Senator over the origins of that house fire, then it could only further his problems, sooner or later. I thought that it would suit us most if those problems arrived for the Senator sooner. But how could I arrange to get word, in some safe and evidently anonymous way, to the fiend who held himself to be the legal owner of our poor Tilly?

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Chapter 49

They agreed to my plan, but only by the skin of my teeth. Several members of our network had gathered to present me with a letter from a fellow in a different state, asking about a specific visitor of the Senator's.

"It is dangerous to contact Tilly's owner."

I had to agree. "But, we already have a great deal of information about both Smith and Mr. Loving."

One nodded:

"Yes, some are even coming to admire Mr. Loving," with a deep frown. "They say that despite being in the Senator's employ, he abhors the institution of slavery."

I leaned forward:

"Dividing them in order to better ruin the Senator will not be difficult, now that we know Smith's vices. This would be of tremendous benefit to our cause, for a great many reasons, but," I insisted, "Tilly's owner is the key."

I got several doubtful looks.

I raised a finger: “Tilly came to us via a different Conductor. There is no telling how many more overseers, bounty hunters, and other slave owners have the remaining details of our network.”

The Doubting Thomas began pacing the room.

“True, but how does alerting her putative owner help us? He will simply come and claim her, legally.”

“Not if we can get to her before he arrives. He will send a telegram, surely, to have her held for him. And then…”

I raised a second finger, and waited.

A Porter finished for me: “Then he must come in person to present proof of ownership.”

“Just so. And during that time,” I spaced my hands as if opening a letter, ”between his telegram and his arrival, we have an opportunity.”

I had written back to my questioner to tell him that I had indeed heard of his visitor, and proceeded, a bit slowly, to encode my response in a fairly long letter to him, giving him as many details as I could recall of that visit, and any other names, dates, and gifts, I could recall.

A funny thought hit me, as I remembered a peculiar piece of embroidery. I'd worked on it during the visit by a certain New York Life Insurance company man. I had been given a certain handkerchief by Miss Mary, saying that the Senator had need of more like this, right away. I was to copy the decoration in the corners. It was a simple decoration, and I had briefly wondered why the Senator would want this rather than some pretty flower or other motif. I knew, now. It was no decoration. It had been letters. Someone's initials. But they were not the Senator's initials. Who had that gift been for, and to what end?

I vowed never again to work in ignorance. I would always know the ends of any work I was doing. After all, was that not the truest part of freedom?

To get the attention of Tilly's legal owner, I decided that another gift might help. Information on this dispute between Price and the Senator might gain his attention. Surely he was looking for young Tilly. How to find his name?

If we could provoke the confrontation between Smith and Loving, and ensure that someone credible reported the words from that confrontation to Charles Price, he might lead us to Tilly's "owner". What words could lead Price to find that man for us, I was not yet sure.

One Conductor, after hearing my story of the years spent in attendance upon the Senator, had urged me to listen to my instinct, as I worked out my plan to free little Tilly. For it was I who was left to do this, largely alone. Those of this city were worried over the damage to the network,

working urgently to find any other men susceptible to doing what our former friend *Farmer Brown* had done.

So, obeying my instinct, I tried to find a way to involve that trader in human flesh, Charles Price, and his men in this affair, in the hopes that they would at the very least, help spread the word, if not find Tilly's owner. We knew that Price was seeking to lay hands on my beloved Anna. We must make Tilly important, somehow, to Price, before this tavern brawl, then, unleash the mad dog Smith and his men upon the poor Mr. Loving.

I did feel a twinge of guilt as I planned an event which I knew would be to the emotional detriment, if not also to the very person, of the Senator's secretary. I did not feel too much guilt, however, for the man was still a well paid employee whose salary came in large part from the suffering of many people held in chains.

Price, himself being even more involved in the traffic of people in chains, might feel it important to know why the two head hirelings of his chief associate in this endeavor to recapture us were quarreling, as it might affect him.

If we could have Price's men there to hear for themselves this quarrel that would transpire between Smith and Loving, then perhaps he would notify Tilly's owner. Especially if that brawl made the papers. After the articles were published, we could then have friends of our cause follow up by sending letters to the editors of the various papers to which they were subscribers, and in this

way, extend the reach of that news. Better still, if Price should feel that his interest were somehow threatened, he might intervene personally to protect Tilly merely as a way to protect Anna.

"Ouch!"

I needed to pay more attention to what I was doing. The idea came back to me of how the Senator appeared not to be paying his overseers, the perfect source of disgruntlement. If Smith was seen as being favored by the Senator, he would blame Mr. Loving, especially if they happen to stumble over the bookish man as they were being thrown out of the tavern. How to raise the question of their pay? Perhaps by having the tavern keeper insist on payment in coin for their drink? Would he take such a risk when the Senator was likely to have given orders to put their drinking down to his credit? Unless…

If a stealthy unseen onlooker were able to put a word into one of their ears, for them to shout out, making the others think that it had come from one of their own, could that start the fight? But then, even so, that did not make mention of young Tilly's being held in the Senator's power. The conflict must revolve around how the Senator was refusing to pay his overseers, while he was certainly paying for young Tilly to be boarded somewhere. And, well fed enough to be displayed at a baudy house. That must cost the Senator something in coin. Or did it? I couldn't risk anyone speaking a word that would merely be dismissed and forgotten, or worse, causing an argument that had nothing to do with young Tilly.

I continued to ponder the problem of getting Price's attention strongly enough to push him to communicate Tilly's presence here to her owner. As I prepared to go to sleep, bedding down this night in the back room of a dry goods shop with a sheep dog for company, an idea came to me. What if we gave him the firm impression that the Senator had every intention of doing to Anna what he was now doing to young Tilly?

"Well, that would threaten the value of his investment, now wouldn't it," I asked my furry companion.

I got no answer from the sheep dog, but if Price thought that the Senator posed even the slightest threat to Anna, he would intervene at once, as would any southern slave owner, particularly of a Fancy, as Anna could have been. It was a dangerous idea, but it was next to my only idea, and I had no time to lose. Now, I needed someone brave enough to be in the tavern, willing to plant the words that would begin a brawl among well armed and drunken southern men.

I then recalled the young Porter whom I had dubbed *Courageous Red*. I wondered just how much courage he had, for courage, he would need if he took up this endeavor. I wrote a message that seemed sufficiently innocuous not to need coding if I could get it directly to him, or to another Porter whom I trusted to give directly to him.

"Now, how do we get this note to him, hmm, my furry friend?"

Again, my sheep dog merely looked at me. Just then, a ray of sunlight shone through the window, and I was surprised to see that it was already dawn. How quickly the night had passed as I meditated upon my plan. It had finally been worth the lost sleep, for now I could begin putting the pieces in place. As I rose to freshen myself for the day, I heard a knock at the inner door, and cautiously went to answer it. The dog ran ahead of me, eagerly pawing the keyhole, as though he recognized the person on the other side. Thus reassured, I opened it, to find the very person I had intended to speak with standing waiting, hat in hand as the last time we had spoken.

"Well, good morning," I smiled with a nod, "Courageous Red."

"Good morning, Ma'am."

He gave me a shy smile, bowed, and handed me a message. I accepted it with a nod of thanks, glanced down at it, and as I handed him my message, curtsied, and then shut the door in his face. I hated to be so discourteous, but I had gotten a glimpse of the name on the message.

The sender claimed to be Anna!

***

Chapter 50

The message really was from Anna. I could see her distinctive mix of cursive and print handwriting, which she used when she was in a hurry. I first read the words quickly, seeking any of the words I already knew for danger, and finding none, stopped.

What was that whining sound? I looked down:

"Shhh. Hush now."

My faithful furry companion was pawing the door, but I only had eyes for Anna's letter. I sniffed the paper, hoping to find her scent there, and then traced the lines of her writing with my fingers, feeling her own fingers as mine traced the indentation of her lines in the paper.

I devoured the words again. *She is safe!* She even seemed to be doing fairly well, all things considered. I wished that she could be with me, to share a warm bath, wished that I could wash her back for her, and run my fingers through her hair as I washed her curly locks.

I read her note again, slowly, relieved to have some word from her, at last, and to know that even if she was not with me in the flesh right now, she was so in spirit. She was safe. She was also aware of the situation, and urging me, like everyone else, to flee right away. Had she, too, given up young Tilly for lost? *No*. She would meet me at the border? *Which border?*

Another knock came at the door. It was *Courageous Red*, again. Or, perhaps, still. I realized my rudeness, with a start, and felt my face turn hot, as I looked down, stammering.

"I am terribly sorry, I didn't mean to close the door in your face!"

Rather than make a show of bluster, or even speak a word at all, he merely looked at me, and smiled. And it was a warm smile, not at all the cold harsh one that I might have expected. He bowed, again, telling me that he had thought that a word from Anna might move me so, as he, and indeed all of the Porters, were worried for her, having no word of her doings from the tight-lipped Conductors, much less from any of the Station Masters. Of course. Discretion was the money of exchange in this endeavor. Even I had no idea whether she was in contact with any of them. Her note had given me no hint of other connections.

I refused to leave this city without our Tilly.

I invited *Red* in for a moment, asking if he'd had time to read my note. He had, he assured me, and also wished fervently to do as I bid, the eagerness of youth for adventure shining so brightly that his red locks glowed with that fire which only those who have not yet seen too much loss, too much pain, still had. I dropped him a half-curtsy.

"Thank you."

That was as much as I dared say, my instincts telling me not to be too kindly with this ardent young man. I would not risk giving him illusions of affection which I did not have, and frankly wished to avoid. He left, after promising to perform every duty I could ask to his utmost, assuring me that he also knew just the right group of young adventurers for the task. I had risked explaining it to him because I felt that he needed to feel useful in our endeavor, not having been entrusted yet, with the tasks of a Conductor. The zeal of this young man might work to the advantage of us both, if he could help me accomplish the task I had in mind, and thus also gain for himself the recognition of his superiors in the network, this Underground Railroad, or the section thereof, here in Philadelphia. Not to mention the fact that I had no one else to turn to. Every other person with whom I was in contact had joined Anna in urging me to flee Northward without delay. I would have to trust to the courage and discretion, not to mention good judgment, of this young man with the flaming red hair.

My furry friend's ears pricked up. I thought I had heard something, too, like something hitting a window.

"What is it?"

I watched those ears closely as they indeed swiveled toward a back window. It turned out to be one of *Courageous Red's* band of fellow adventurers. They were even younger than he was. Every so often, starting near the end of the afternoon, tiny young street urchins would knock at my door, or I would hear a pebble at one of the windows, and a note would appear, informing me of his progress. Since none of these little ones, mostly orphans, I had been told, could read, he had not taken the time to encode any of them. I was surprised to see that most of them were colored

children, until being told that the white orphans were taken in more often at the orphanages, most of which did not allow colored children. Though there were some facilities for what they called *special classes* of children, they were not enough to house the many children of all classes that roamed the streets, hungry and poorly cared for, if at all. So I was especially glad to be able to use our money to give them enough for a meal, every time one of them delivered a message reporting on *Red's* progress. He'd been able to find watchers to take notes as they egged on that vile Smith in his cups, and others to encourage the tavern keeper to throw the villain out at just the right moment.

Courageous Red's next updates were even more impressive.

He had accomplished his task: no fewer than four of his friends were hidden within earshot of Smith and his cronies as they drunkenly complained of not being paid by the Senator, blaming Mr. Loving as I had hoped, then turning to a disgusting and bawdy conversation on the merits of visiting brothels, and the one in particular where a certain:

"little mulatto whore eats real good," to the raucous laughter of his men, he reported.

As planned, at that point one of Red's more intrepid friends complained to the tavern keeper about the low sorts being served too much drink at his establishment. He started the brawl which allowed certain other friends to shout out *Loving* while insulting the Senator and defending the honor of colored ladies all at once.

This had the desired effect.

All involved were ejected from the tavern.

Two more of his well paid street children set off to fetch their friends for the next part of our plan.

With each message I received, my stomach took a lurch, waiting for the next part of the plan to be set in motion. All four pieces, those of Smith, Loving, Price, and Tilly's master, had to fall smoothly into place for our plan to work.

"Good Lord, please do not let any of your little children be trampled under the calloused feet of these brutes."

A pebble tapped against one of the back windows, and I locked the door before going to the back. I opened the window, finding a note left under a rock waiting for me on the ledge. I glanced about, put my hand out, and slammed the window shut. I saw no one in the back alley. I'd been warned to be especially careful of that alley, as it led to one of the seedier streets in the area.

This note contained only two words:

"*theft halted*"

I this took to to mean that *Red* had gotten word from his young hirelings that they had finished the most dangerous part of their task. Their friends, acting as Good Samaritans, were to *catch* the two friends acting as the thieves, and return Mr. Loving's ever present ledger book to him, and, most importantly, in the right location.

They had succeeded. I still worried. Were the purported thieves unharmed? Was Mr. Loving in the right place? Were Smith and the others still brawling about missing pay and young Tilly, outside that tavern? *Is Tilly safe?*

How could I possibly have thought that I would be able to direct such a complex plan, while hidden away, no less? I felt myself suddenly assailed by doubts, terribly worried for Tilly, and for *Red*, and the street children who were carrying out our plan at this very moment. Just as my breaths were becoming shorter and my stomach beginning to tie itself into nauseous knots, a knock came at the door.

I rushed to the door, opening it without thinking to look first, but fortune had smiled upon me, and I was met by a tiny waif of a colored girl, shyly holding a note with a coin, looking for all the world as if she were there to purchase something for her mistress.

"Come in."

She had quickly stepped through even before I could fully open the door. *Perfect*. I got her settled on a stool and gave her a biscuit to eat while I read the note she had handed me as I had closed the door. This one would make not only a good Porter, soon, but an excellent Conductor to boot, should colored girls be allowed to do so, until that blessed day when this infamous Peculiar Institution should be ended in all territories of the Union. Pushing those thoughts aside, I saw that this note was the answer to my prayers:

"*book loves tavern brawls*"

I understood this could only mean that Mr. Loving had been given back his famous ledger book, in front of the tavern, just as Smith and his men were having their long awaited brawl. Now, whether Smith and this famous brawl were still just in front of that tavern, as they ought to be, or moving away by now, was still a question for which I was anxiously awaiting an answer. My little messenger having finished eating her biscuit, I gave her back her coin, then handed her a basket with more biscuits, for which she rewarded me with a broad smile, curtsied, and turned and left like a flash. Her tiny curtsy, clumsy but well enough executed to be acceptable, reminded me of the contrasting perfection of our little Tilly's performance, and the child's mischievous smile.

I had no time to think on our young Tilly any more, for which I was actually grateful, having had to fight back the tears. *I must focus on the matter at hand.* Another knock came at the door. This time it was a small colored boy, carrying what looked like a sack of flour that must have weighed more than he did. I did not know where my next note might be concealed, and I hoped it was not inside the sack, as I hated to waste good flour. I hastened the boy inside, where he dropped the sack with a thump, and then produced the expected note from an inner pocket in his coat, before bowing like a gentleman, and turning to open the door, look both ways, and then dash back out, leaving the door pulled to, but not quite shut, apparently so as to avoid making the noise of closing the door all the way. This note read:

"*The price is paid for all out brawl!*"

At this, I breathed a sigh of relief, and then drew my first full breath of the last several hours, taking those words to mean that everyone, from Smith, to his vile men, and Mr. Loving, and

even either Charles Price's men, or Price himself, were all outside of the tavern, watching the brawl if not taking part in it, and that all of the street children involved in this endeavor, either as messengers or as active participants, had been paid in coin as well, I hoped, as in at least some bit of extra food. This must mean that the most intricate part of the plan, that of getting the attention of Charles Price long enough to have him send a trusted man, or even to go himself to investigate, must be happening at this very moment.

I imagined the scene I had planned, with that mad dog Smith and his mangy curs who worked under him shouting drunkenly at Mr. Loving about not getting their pay, and provoking him, not to mention Charles Price, about how young Tilly was being treated too well, staying at that house of ill repute while she awaited a fate worse than death should anyone provide what the Senator thought to be valid information on how to find me. I could not help allowing my thoughts to stray into worried visions of what might be happening to our poor Tilly even at this very moment, but I knew that I must keep my thoughts on the plan.

I had yet to receive confirmation about the most important part of the plan, now that all of the key men were together in one place. Had any mention been made of Tilly, and if so, had Charles Price understood it, and been made aware of the theft which the Senator was perpetrating upon the trader? If not, how would I remedy this before it was too late?

Just then, another knock came at the door, and a very small red haired child stepped in as soon as I opened it, even helping me close it behind him. I handed him a biscuit as he handed me a note, and spoke one word:

"Reply."

I gathered that this meant that I was to write a reply on the back side of the note, and hand it back to this lad, who would take it to *Red* immediately. The situation must be grave, indeed. I looked at the note, which seemed scrawled in a very hasty hand, and sat down with pen and ink before I read it. It was one line:

"Price leaving, what to do?"

Almost without thinking, for I had imagined this scenario over and over the entire night before, I turned the note over and turned to find ink. The boy tugged on my dress:

"I can remember real good, Miss. I'm to repeat your words."

A very good idea, as long as this young boy did not get himself caught. We'd have to risk it.

I bent down and whispered in his ear:

"*Have someone yell out the words '***He don't pay his men, but he sold the freckled mulatto gal!***' then, everyone must laugh.*"

I ushered him out the door, watching him take off running even as I began closing the door and locking it. Here was another child who would make an excellent member of this network, for as long as it was so sadly and so sorely needed. Those words would be an awful risk to Tilly,

vulnerable as she was, but no southern man, especially Smith, could stand being laughed at. Especially not by Yankees. That would surely get his blood up, and cause more fighting.

The reference to both money and to selling Anna would stop Price in his tracks, and Loving as well, for both men would be obliged to check on those allegations. It would help if the one who shouted it could do a reasonable imitation of a Virginia or Maryland accent. Here, so close to the border, I dared to hope.

The next hour was an agony of waiting and worrying. Just as it was growing light outside, a knock came at the door, and it turned out to be *Courageous Red*, himself, all smiles. With a triumphant laugh and an extra flourish of his hat after I had closed the door, he bowed low before me, and presented me with a bouquet of the most lovely red roses. I nearly vomited on him.

"Are you ill, Miss Beth?"

This name was derived from the popular name Elizabeth. At least I was told that it was a popular name, for it was not one that I had thought to be especially popular. I tried to ponder the issue of names, rather than that of roses.

"No, thank you, *Red*, I am fine. Merely fatigued."

Oh, no. I was also starting to sound like …

“So, how did your young friends like their pay increases? I ask because I can see, by your manner, that our endeavor has evidently been successfully.”

I tried to smile politely at him, but kept my distance, so as not to give him false impressions. He already had false hopes, despite my attempts to prevent them. He seemed not to notice, bouncing closer as I stepped back. I said nothing, hating to spoil the air of youthful delight on his face.

“They ate their pay increase with gusto, giving thanks to the good Lord above, and to your kindness as well, Miss Beth.”

“You also paid them all in coin, I expect, with extra for our little thieves and Good Samaritans, I hope. Was it enough?”

“Oh, yes, the money you gave me went around most generously, and with just a little to spare.”

He made a half bow as he extended his arm to give me the change, left over from the money that I had carried for the three of us to use in our journey North. I had judged it needful to spend as much of our money as it took to accomplish this task.

I'd hoped we could find work along the way to support ourselves, but nothing would do if we lost young Tilly. I could not allow this young man to go unpaid, especially as his gallantry, it was now clear to me, was out of a desire for something which I could not give him.

"Please, do keep the rest for yourself."

At his abashed look, I added:

"For you above all have risked much, and the laborer is worth his hire."

At this, he nodded, accepting my pay for him, and pocketing the remaining money inside his coat. As he looked up, I quickly added:

"Now, please tell me how it all went, and spare no detail, not a single one."

The young man smiled, drawing himself up to his full height as he puffed out his chest, striking a theatrical pose. *This young man really ought to be in theater.* I smiled in spite of myself. That brought a smile from him, as he began, almost as though he were declaiming poetry.

"Well, now first I saw to the arrangement," he nodded in my direction, "as you suggested," then tilted his head before continuing, "of the part of the affair with Mr. Charles Price, making sure to hire some friends to be at the other tavern, and I had to get this from one of our watchers, friends of our cause who have been keeping an eye on both of these southerners since they came to town on their dastardly mission of dragging yourself," here, he bowed again to me, "the worthy *Miss*

Wright, and your young charge" his face falling into a rapid succession of sadness and anger, "back into the claws of that villainous beast of a Peculiar Institution, as they call slavery."

He took a deep breath, and then made a tossing salt over his shoulder motion, as though to rid himself of some evil spirit, and then continued, again striking that storyteller's pose.

"I made sure to tell them which men to sit near," he waved a hand as if warding off a bad smell, grinned, and continued, "so as to be sure to be overheard, and to gossip rather loudly about a certain rumor they had heard tell of at that *other* tavern, about how that low Mr. Smith had just caught a freckled lady, and that none of them had ever seen a slave with freckles, for didn't that make her just as white as they were, and right over by that tavern where Smith always seems to drink!"

Then he sent a telling look at me, before going on.

"I also told them to be sure to act surprised about Smith and his men not getting paid, as they were doing their drinking on credit."

He went on to tell me about how proud his friends were as they ran to him, reporting that they had both seen Price's men leave to go find him with looks of anger upon their faces, and already sent one of their fastest runners to warn those in the tavern that it was time to get Smith thrown out, by use of judicious tips to the right servers, and many complaints to the tavern keeper.

I thanked *Red* for his valiant work, wondering aloud if we knew any press men willing to write an article about this night's events. He added that he had indeed paid attention to my earlier comment in this regard, and had already sent a note about the incident to one of their company known to the Conductors as a newspaper man willing to write for several of the smaller local papers. He noted that the local constables also regularly listed this type of event in the papers, so he was confident that we could expect good coverage from many different sources.

Courageous Red's confidence was not misplaced. The local paper did indeed print a long article about the altercation, even mentioning that it was the Senator who had put little Tilly on display, and giving the exact name of the brothel in question where she was being held. After that article appeared, more articles appeared, along with a great number of letters to the editor, expressing horrified indignation at the Senator's actions, and asking if it was legal, and how such a thing could be allowed. The war of words between the trader Charles Price and the Senator also spilled into the local papers up here, with each accusing the other of intention to steal their property, and of libel, slander, and a number of other offenses which, I knew that had the Senator considered Price to be a gentleman, rather than a vulgar man of commerce, he would have challenged him to a duel with pistols. I shuddered at the bitter memory of duels the Senator had won.

By the end of that very same day, almost miraculously, I had thought, until I remembered the telegraph office near the tavern, we had news: the plan had succeeded!

I was informed that a *Cease and Desist* order had been served upon the Senator and also upon Smith by both local and Maryland constables by order of a court in Virginia, reordered by courts here and in Maryland, to release our poor Tilly into the custody of local constables.

The local magistrate here in Philadelphia had further directed their head constable to lodge Tilly, in accordance with the “secure location” ordered by the Virginia court, in a respectable hotel of that official’s choosing, under guard, there to await the arrival of her lawful owner.

The Senator had been ordered to pay all expenses for her lodgings. Even better, the Senator appeared to be under further investigation back in his home jurisdiction, with something called a *subpoena* having been issued to him.

I did not yet know what this meant, but I was assured that it was very good for our side.

Finally, and most importantly, the local court, and Tilly’s owner, being suspicious that the Senator might try to harm her in some way to prevent her from speaking, both the Senator, his attack dog Smith, and the beasts who worked for him were all refused permission to come anywhere within five hundred feet of Tilly, by local court order at the request of her legal owner, one Mr. Tibbet, of Maryland, it seemed.

The plan had worked, and Tilly was safe from the Senator. Now we simply needed to bribe or otherwise trick her guard before Tibbet arrived, and she would be safely back with us.

***

Chapter 51

We got our beautiful little Tilly back safe and sound!

I was overjoyed, and glad that all had gone so smoothly in her rescue. I had asked the men who went to get her from the hotel to tell her to:

“be strong, and of good courage,” and, then, to wait to see what she would say.

They told me that upon hearing these words, the child had responded:

“for the Lord is with us!”

She then merrily jumped to take the hand of the Porter who was waiting for her to go with him, and she had even skipped over the prone body of her guard, whom she told them had stolen her after dinner ice cream for himself.

The dessert for our meal that evening had been reading in the paper that the vile head overseer Smith, along with two of his more vicious men, about whom complaints had been recorded in various local neighborhood papers and larger papers from here back to Shrewsbury, had all been dismissed from the Senator’s service, and even humiliatingly escorted to the Maryland border by local state militia.

Now that I knew that Anna was safe, I wondered how long we would have to wait to hear from her again, as I was anxious for us to continue North.

We didn't have to wait long. To my delight, Anna walked through the door just after we finished eating supper, and were looking forward to dessert, a surprise, in honor of that dessert which had been stolen from young Tilly by the constable during her captivity. I was thankful that the dessert was all that had been stolen from her. And then I gave a second prayer of thanks. Anna was back!

The three of us fell into a hug that moved everyone in the room. Hands were shaken all around, a place was set at the table for Anna, who was served a heaping plate of supper to eat in peace while all celebrated. *Courageous Red was* called upon to recite the story of how we had orchestrated the luring of Mr. Tibbet up here, and how Tilly had been rescued from under the nose of one gluttonous local constable. With that, it was time to have a special treat for dessert: ice cream all around.

We had actually done it. Thanks in tremendous part to what Anna had taught me, about so many things both practical and natural, like trees, and even to what young Tilly had taught me about believing in what was possible. The local papers were all leading both evening and morning edition headlines with stories about Charles Price, his quarrels with the Senator over the house fire in Maryland, and how Tilly seemed to have disappeared from under the nose of Mr. Tibbet, who was furiously accusing the Senator of having stolen the resale value of little Tilly, if not her person, yet again. Courageous Red left after his recital to attend get more messages sent out to our network.

Local readers were already writing to the editor, scandalized that such a small child as Tilly might be used in such ways with out the slightest regard for her tender age, let alone her own consent in the matter. I hoped that the uproar would encourage Price to leave the state, or even take the Senator to court, both of which would provide good distraction from our further escape, but Anna thought that Price would stay long enough to continue looking for her, as long as the Senator remained in the city. The next news came bursting through the door with our *Courageous Red*:

"This special extra edition of the paper has set you free!"

***

Chapter 52

We celebrated as we laid our final plans to leave Philadelphia, recalling that even if the Senator chose to obey the order to go back to Virginia, we were far from free.

Courageous Red had insisted on accompanying us for the first half day's ride out of the city. Someone lent me a good bay mare. She was young and a little skittish, but I was able to handle her. Anna rode with young Tilly on Captain, Tilly preferring to hold on to Anna from behind, rather than risk being near the pommel again.

We had trotted for nearly an hour, *Red* taking the lead, as he planned to circle around in a meandering path out of the way while heading back, so as to help confuse any trackers trying to follow us.

He suddenly kicked his horse into a run. Captain and my bay followed automatically. Courageous Red was the first to go down. I saw him falling from his horse before I even heard the fatal gunshot, and then his horse was gone, my fear crazed bay snorting and skipping, then bolting at the sound of the next gunshot.

I heard the sound as I saw the world spin around, while I thought I saw…

Tilly!

No, not her!

I opened my eyes to a blur of red hair, matted with blood, lying only a few feet away from me.

Anna had charged. Captain reared, throwing little Tilly, and then proceeded to run down the man standing in his path. But then, he had been shot, and the valiant horse now lay on top of Anna. Both were motionless.

My bay was also unmoving.

I found myself being dragged roughly to my feet, my arm screaming in protest. I grit my teeth and just managed not to vomit.

It was a dark brown face, eyes black, darting about, and mouth quivering, that looked at mine. In the growing gloom it was getting harder to see, but his voice was sickeningly familiar.

“I’m sorry, Miss. So sorry. But I had to do it, I had to.”

It was our old friend, *Farmer Brown*. He had been the one, I could now see it replaying in my mind’s eye, who had stepped in front of us, dashing in front of Captain on the narrow path so suddenly that he'd seemed more intent on committing suicide than betrayal.

“You got no knife or nothing like that on you, do you Miss? I don’t want to have to search you.”

I was shocked that he would still bother with manners at a time like this. I could only glare at him.

“You a healer, Miss, you ain’t no murderer, I know it.”

I tried to give him a look that might make him think otherwise, hoping he would let me go, but he shook his head, whispering:

“Won’t help no way. You just hang while I be free.”

I stared at him, my head snapping back for a moment.

He nodded, affirming, “Um hum. I’d be the one get free, really free. Even if you kill yo master, all them other slaves back there, they get sold one by one, taken away, no more family, no friends, all for his damned debts.”

Whose debts? The Senator’s? But how did this man, unlettered as he was, know about that?

“How do you-”

“Oh, I hears things. Everybody, for that matter, done heard about it, now. You done gone and made a right nice mess for that big ole white man.”

Then I remembered the grapevine. If his debts were that well known, it would be a serious problem for the Senator. Something I could use. If we survived.

But this one, *Farmer Brown*, here, debt had nothing to do with.

“Why little Tilly,” I demanded.

Mr. *Brown* had gone still, hanging his head, even starting to tremble:

“I got myself free from old Master Tibbet when that little thing was just starting to walk. Now, that bounty hunter, the colored slave catcher, comes to me and tell me that the master knows where I been living these last few years, like as if I was free, and this free issue slave catcher aims to bring me back to him, in chains. Except for one thing. The master willin’ to make a deal with me.”

“Why?”

"'cause he want little Tilly back more than he want old me. So, he tells me that if I was to take him to where that little gal was hiding, and on the way, tell him everything I know about them thieves that stole her, then he would give me my freedom."

I was trembling, with rage:

"You treacherous fool. Do you really think he will give you your freedom?"

"Yes'm. Give it to me, no whips, no chains, not even no workin' for years to save up and buy my freedom. Me free, for free. And they was bound to find that young'un anyway. So, what was I supposed to do? You tell me, miss, you tell me."

"Not this."

I started to pull away, but stopped short, barely controlling the pain in my arm.

"You know better."

He simply ignored me.

"I don't wish none of y'all no harm, but a man got to look out for himself, too, don't he?"

So, *Farmer Brown* had made a deal with the devil to save his body, if not his soul.

***

Chapter 53

Just then, Mr. Loving's face, rode into view. *How… Oh.* Of course. He looked behind him. The Senator couldn't be far.

What passed next was only a blur. Two men appeared, with a third man nearly visible down the path. One I did not recognize. The other, I knew all too well.

The Senator laid his glowering eyes upon me, then slowly swiveled his head, surveying the destruction along the path. A cry of strangled malice erupted from the other, a frog-like man I hoped was Mr. Tibbet. He alighted from his horse with surprising agility, running to the broken body of our poor little Tilly. Farmer Brown held me firm against my own desire to run to her.

The Frog rounded on the Senator and began shouting about investments, loss, and lawyers. I sat down right in the mud where I was, Farmer Brown letting my arm go. *Think!*

I remembered something: the look of pure relish on the Senator's face as he had me serve his visitors drinks and cigars. My place was beside the Senator's chair, always within view, but never within reach. I had been present when one asked the Senator at what price he would be willing to part with me, as though I were not even in the room. After watching my face for a moment, the Senator had turned back to his guest, and smiled:

"She is not for sale."

Jealousy. It was a start, but I would need something else, something more concrete, as well, to fight with. And Mr. Loving had given it to us.

Anna had taught me that it was important to know what your enemies did not know. What a man doesn't know, is that which can be used to ruin him. I knew that the Senator played poker, and that he was a man who could not bluff. But Anna certainly could.

As the Frog shouted at the Senator, I began to count my options. We had gotten Loving's ledger book, but not long enough to read any of its damning secrets. Did Loving realize that, and if so, had he yet told the Senator? I thought it unlikely. *It will have to do*. I now must learn to bluff, and to do it very well, as Anna had shown me with Smith.

"That is my final word, Tibbet!"

The Senator turned back to me, ignoring the shouting. Tibbet finally turned, remounted, and rode away in a huff. That Frog hadn't even bothered to call for a doctor.

I steeled myself to ignore all but this moment. *Follow Anna's example.* I straightened my back, and looked straight at the Senator, head held high, like a Virginia Lady:

"I wrote four copies of a letter."

His mouth dropped open, and then he closed it, putting his hands on his hips and shaking his head, beginning to smile. Mr. Loving was not smiling, but the Senator did not notice. I had expected both of these reactions.

"You cannot write a letter."

Then, he began to laugh, saying, "I know you could not possibly have had time to learn to read, and then to write, and then to address a letter to any literate person who would take the time to decipher your chicken scratch."

He laughed harder, and slapped his thigh in mirth. I simply rolled my eyes and waited. The delay would do me good, giving more time for my friends to gather their forces to come and help Anna. Whether I went back to Virginia or not, letters most certainly would be sent. I had heard all of these mentioned as I told network leaders of the Senator's affairs.

Now, that memory of mine which captured every lurid noise he made, and forced me to relive events I had tried desperately to forget, would serve us all for a better cause. I walked carefully back through the images and words of the various visits with Porters, Conductors, Station Masters, and Abolitionist visitors, during my stay in this city.

"We have pages from Mr. Loving's ledger book."

The Senator immediately stopped laughing, his face going pale. I nodded to Mr. Loving in confirmation, as his face became even more pale, his eyes darting to and fro. Loving's eyes widened, as if he'd read my thoughts. I nodded to confirm his fears:

"Yes, that night."

As Mr. Loving's face took on a look of horror, I added, "Credit problems, Senator?"

The Senator's face began to take on that familiar shade of red I knew so well. I lifted my chin defiantly, waiting for the explosion. His face drained of all color as he straightened and started to turn.

"Now, wait just a damned minute!"

He rounded on Mr. Loving, cane rising into the air, his voice dropping into a dangerous whisper:

"Loving, exactly what night, pray tell, is this gal talking about?"

He took a step toward the gaunt man, who was trembling now. Loving knew the Senator's foul temper as well as I did.

"Those letters will not be sent, Senator," I lowered my voice now, "if I am allowed to go free, with my manumission papers."

His head jerked up, and he turned to stare at me, a look of pure disbelief stamped across his face.

"They will be, however, if I am taken into your custody."

Now the look was changing to one of rage. I could tell by the light of the rising sun. His face quickly went from red to purple, the veins in his neck visible even from where I stood in the growing daylight.

"Is one unwilling Fancy really worth all that trouble? Especially one who *will* be dead, if you take me back, before ever reaching Virginia?"

I paused, knowing that he was thinking over how difficult it would be, now that he had seen for himself that I could read and ride horse, to prevent me from escaping, much less killing myself.

"I will have a difficult time attending you and your visitors if you are obliged to keep me under lock and key," seeing his eyebrows rise, I quickly added, "no, not because I will try to escape again, no."

For the first time in my life, I saw him tilt his head, and wait. Waiting for me, to speak. And so, I spoke:

“I will wait, patiently, until my chance arrives. And I *will* die, Senator. Is it really worth it, to keep me, when you *will* be ruined, and only to stay in possession of one more Fancy *corpse*?”

I was rewarded with a new first, both for me, and evidently also for Mr. Loving, whose mouth hung agape.

The Senator was speechless.

The foul man’s mouth worked itself into a frothy foam, opening and closing as his jaw clenched and fell alternatively, while the veins of his neck stood out so that a blind man could have seen them.

Even Farmer Brown, who had relaxed almost entirely, now that Mr. Tibbet had left, appeared surprised. I heard a soft chuckle from him, as a furious shouting began, coming from the portly man in the distance.

The Senator turned to look behind him, still brandishing his cane.

“Mr. Price.”

The portly man stepped up, nose to nose with that famous cane, apparently unafraid:

“What is going on, here, Senator?”

Price held up a sheaf of papers.

“My affairs in Alexandria, are being threatened by your credit problems.”

Farmer Brown stepped back, releasing me entirely, and I fell to the ground.

I feverishly checked on little Tilly, whose mangled body had fallen beneath the hooves of my bay almost exactly where I had fallen moments later. My bay was long dead, judging by the already cooling body of that horse, as I crawled over it to get to Anna. I stayed with Anna, for I had already seen our *Courageous Red* fall.

I’d seen a red stain spreading across his back where his valiant heart had to be, nearly motionless as he fell from his horse.

Anna, I could feel, was still breathing. I whispered into her ear:

“Anna! Can you talk?”

She had fluttered her eyes, and whispered back:

“I am alright, I just have a broken arm, that’s all. It got stepped on by one of the horses when I fell, but I’m alright,” she had whispered, saying, “don’t worry,” before passing out cold.

I had done anything but not worry, shaking her, shouting her name, checking all over for some other wound I must have missed, but in all of the blood that covered her body, still half hidden under the body of Captain, I could make no headway. I suddenly became aware of the silence, then.

I hadn't realized it earlier in all of the ruckus of the Senator and Charles Price shouting at one another because I had focused in on Anna, willing her to be alive, and hoping that her wounds were such that I could tend to them. Now, as if in some bizarre dream, I was aware that the two men had ceased their shouting.

All I could hear was the last breath I had seen Anna take, as she passed out. I frantically shouted her name, feeling her chest, and trying to move our brave Captain, now rapidly cooling in the chilly air as my smaller borrowed bay had already begun to do. Captain had fallen across nearly all of Anna's body, trapping her from the bosom all the way down to her feet, such that she could not move in anyway, it seemed. That was, if she had been conscious. I feared that she was dying.

"Farmer Brown, do something!" I shouted up at him: "You must help her."

The man stood, tears rolling down his face, shaking his head.

I felt a hand seize my arm and roughly shove me aside. I screamed in pain and rage as I hit the ground.

I looked up to see the Senator raising his cane, as the portly but surprisingly sprightly Charles Price whirled to face him, drawing a sword from his walking stick:

"I warn you, Sir, I will not tolerate any further threats from you! I should not like to have it come to that, but if I must, I will have satisfaction!"

To my surprise, the Senator immediately lowered his cane. I was crawling back to Anna, still crying her name, as Price turned back and bent down to look at her, sparing not a glance at me, then shook his head, rising with a scowl.

"This is all your fault, *Senator*."

Price had spat the word out in a tone that I had never heard before. I rocked back on my heels to look up, expecting to have to duck the Senator's cane as he swung it at Price, but no such thing happened. Instead, the Senator merely began to stammer.

Price, however, glowered at him, glanced back at Anna, gave a humpf, and stormed away.

"Senator, I will see you in court, back in Alexandria!"

Price mounted his horse.

The Senator whirled around to follow, shouting, “It’s not my fault, Price! This is all a mistake! Price!”

I could clearly hear the shout over his shoulder that his “lawyers will be in touch with your man. Your days are numbered, Senator! By God, I will find a telegraph office that is open if I have to ride all the way to the Liberty Bell!”

Charles Price had ridden off with not a word about Anna, leaving her to die, or already having given her up as dead, or beyond saving.

I crawled back over to her, cradling her head as I cried her name over and over again. I was scarcely aware of the sound of the Senator’s horse as he rode off, but I did hear, dimly in the distance, the sound of his voice as he shouted after Price, begging the trader to wait for him, that “it was all a mistake.”

I ignored everything but Anna, beckoning to the still gaping Farmer Brown to help me move Captain’s body off of her, but the horse was too heavy. I looked around.

Mr. Loving also stood transfixed, as if unable to move.

Then I did something I never thought I would have done in a thousand years: I shouted an order at a white man.

“Mr. Loving! Come help us!”

And, to my utter surprise, as I thought back on it later, the white man obeyed me. In the moment, I merely shouted:

“Now!”

He dropped his book, ink, and papers, ran to our side, bent down next to Farmer Brown, and helped him lift Captain, as I rolled Anna from under the horse’s body. As soon as she was free from the weight on her chest, she coughed, and her eyes fluttered open, then closed.

Mr. Loving looked at Farmer Brown:

“Go find help.”

Mr. Brown ran off, I cared not where. I could see Anna’s broken arm swelling, but it looked like what I had been taught should be a clean break, or so I hoped. As I checked Anna for other injuries, Mr. Loving checked on young Tilly and Courageous Red, then came back to me, nodding to his horse as he bent down beside me.

“All of the men followed the Senator. They will not be back.”

I looked at him, not comprehending. He smiled, as if pleased.

“They won’t work for him if he cannot pay them, of course.”

I nodded, relieved, but still not knowing what he intended do do about me. He looked down, and after a moment, looked back up at me, nodding over to Anna as he moved to gather her up into his arms.

“Don’t worry. I shall tell the Senator that you got away, and,” nodding toward Anna, “that I buried Mr. Price’s girl for him free of charge, to help assuage his anger. There will still be a reckoning, of course, but I shall weather it.”

He carried Anna over to his horse, nodding with his chin for me to mount, then hoisted her up into the saddle, as she awoke enough to stay in the seat in front of me while I supported her.

“Go on,” he told me, “I will say that my horse ran off in all the confusion. I can walk back.”

And with those simple words, Mr. Loving nodded at us both, bent to gather his famous ledger book, papers, and quill, the ink pot having shattered on the ground, and turned to walk back the way that everyone else had already gone, taking the deserted path south. We headed North.

I felt Anna shift in the saddle in front of me.

“How do you feel, are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No, just the arm.”

“Are you sure,” I asked, “you seemed not to be breathing.”

I could hear her giggle.

“I held my breath to make myself faint.”

I nudged the unfamiliar horse to continue. We would have to stop soon so that I could splint her arm and check more carefully for other injuries, but for now, the priority was to get out of the area before any owners or bounty hunters came back in search of us. Until the reward postings were withdrawn, any slave catcher could hand us over to the local constabulary, or even carry us south, himself, until we reached Canada.

“Can you stand the pain of a trot?”

“With you here, I could fly.”

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Chapter 54

The Senator cursed again.

He had left Loving there to see to that gal while he went after Price to make the trader see reason. The damned speculator's hired men had blocked him, their horses forming an impassable knot between himself and the madly galloping trader, along the path back to town.

In the end, he had managed to follow Price to the telegraph office, where the trader had been exiting, apparently having sent his telegram, when the Senator had finally caught up with him. But by then it was too late, and with none of the Senator's own men around him, the trader had simply ignored him. Ignored him, the Senator. If he had considered Price a real gentleman, he would have challenged him to a duel, but as it was, he decided he would use other means to deal with the trader.

Returning to his rooms at his hotel on Chestnut Street, he settled in with a cigar to wait for Loving, anticipating the pleasure of finally having his Ann again to attend him. But the knock at the door had instead been that of a messenger boy delivering a summons for him from some court.

Now, he was being harassed by the local judge and bailiffs from that godforsaken town in the Maryland back country over what that fool innkeeper woman was calling *irregularities* in the sale of her tavern, as if his credit wasn't good. *How dare she; forgets her place.* Now, when he left here with his Ann, he would have to give up his desk in that inn, falling back to his usual rooms at the Willard Hotel to finish up his business with Price before going back home to Virginia, damn her.

He had poured himself a whiskey, settling down again, to await the arrival of Loving with his Ann. Where was the man? Another knock came at the door.

“Finally, Loving. What news?” Where was his Ann?

“Well, sir, Senator, I’m afraid I have bad news.”

The Senator lifted his cane.

“Somehow, that colored boy has run off, and what was left of Smith’s boys have all quit, and-”

“That’s enough!” How had she managed to slip through the man’s fingers? *Intolerable*. And lost a good horse, to boot, the fool. As the Senator was raising his cane to teach Loving a lesson, another knock came at the door.

“What is it now, by God?”

Loving, as if his pants were on fire, ran to the door, and flung it open, to reveal yet another messenger, this time with a telegram from his attorney. Price’s attorneys had just contacted him to notify him of their intent to sue him for money owed on three charges: for destruction of property in the matter of his mulatto gal, for libel over the affair of the house fire in Maryland, and most incredibly of all, for attempted assault and battery here in Pennsylvania over the matter of his having threatened to cane the man.

For all of this, the trader apparently intended to sue for damages in both Maryland, and Pennsylvania, and also in his home jurisdiction of Alexandria, now once again part of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

There was another knock at the door.

“What now?!”

A second telegram from his attorney reminded the Senator that he was now no longer permitted to remain upon the soil of Pennsylvania.

“You are ordered, Senator, to surrender yourself to the court in Virginia.”

“What?”

“The legislature has need of your presence upon the most urgent matter of an ongoing investigation: misuse of public funds.”

As if the Great Deluge had returned to open up the heavens and rain messages down upon him, yet another messenger arrived with still more news, but not from his attorney.

Loving had disappeared between the delivery of the first telegram and the second. The Senator had been so busy reading them in disbelief that he had never noticed the gaunt man’s disappearance. Now, however, there was a note from Loving, delivered by the hotel boy.

Loving’s note informed the Senator of three things.

First, that one Dr. Hastings, of Maryland, was suing the Senator, in a civil case, for destruction of property and attempted murder, in the matter of the fire set by Smith’s boys upon the Senator’s orders. This Dr. Hastings was also requesting prosecution of both crimes through the criminal courts of Maryland, and also here in Pennsylvania, as the Senator was known to be in the city of Philadelphia at this time.

Second, that the New York Life Insurance Company would also be suing the Senator, for insurance fraud, in the matter of one slave by the name of Mary, and in a connected matter of a claim involving several slaves alleged to have died in his mills up north. The note assured the Senator that these suits would certainly win, for they would have iron clad evidence to back them.

“Evidence from where?”

The Senator began to laugh as he read the remainder of the message, that coward Loving not even able to take his licks and make his reports like a man should. Then he read the last lines of Loving's note. He stopped laughing. The evidence had already been sent to each of these parties, and notarized by his hand.

"His hand, whose hand?"

The final lines of the note indicated that Loving had also provided copies of the relevant pages from the Senator's private ledger book to a variety of interested parties, having been compelled to report the Senator's illegal activities, and was resigning his employ with the Senator, effective immediately.

"Damn him!"

There was another knock at the door.

"Who is it now?"

"Senator, open in the name of the law."

What was this? The door had opened, not being locked, and in stepped what appeared to be two local constables, and a magistrate, carrying a paper which he held up for the Senator to see:

“Senator, I am afraid that I have been ordered by the court to take you into custody, sir.”

“What is the meaning of this? How dare you-”

“Senator, you are charged with murder, and it is my duty to confine you.”

The Constable had nodded to his men as the Senator watched, unbelieving, while he was manacled, and led from the room.

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Chapter 55

I had urged Mr. Loving's horse on, fearing that the Senator would turn around and come back for us at any moment. Both of our injuries made it excruciating. With one good arm between the two of us, my right wrist and Anna's left arm both broken, I wrapped my left arm around her to hold her close to me. She used her right to hold the reins, and we let our horse have his head, using our legs to hold on to both the saddle, and to each other.

Warm tears dripped down on to my left arm, and I knew that Anna was also weeping for our little Tilly, gone far too young. We had no time to mourn her as we fled, nor to mourn for Captain, nor for *Courageous Red*, also gone too young. *Their deaths will not be in vain.*

We fled along that path, riding mechanically, without thinking. I suddenly remembered what Old Mary had done when Tilly and I had been spotted along the road to Shrewsbury, and I tapped Anna's belly with my left hand.

"Yes, Willow dear?"

"I think we should turn off the path here, to our left."

Anna nodded. Someone would have heard the gunshots. I hoped that they would follow the trail back to find the men responsible for shooting Courageous Red down in cold blood, an act that

was undeniably murder in any state, because he was a white man. That should lead the constables to prioritize what was left of Smith's men, and perhaps even the Senator, rather than looking for us. Tilly, as a slave, was another matter.

No charges but that of property destruction could be leveled for her death, and that only by the now long gone Mr. Tibbet. That was now *Farmer Brown's* problem. Without Tilly to bargain with, he would once again be a fugitive, I supposed. No longer a threat to us.

I hated to have to leave poor Tilly's mangled body behind, but there was nothing we could do for it. I had heard the Senator's orders to Mr. Loving, finally understanding the words he had shouted over his shoulder as he had run to chase after Charles Price.

In spite of my warning that he would be ruined should he take me back into his custody, he had chosen to order Mr. Loving to bring me back. Mr. Loving, being a far more astute man than the Senator, wanted nothing to do with murder charges, not to mention insurance fraud. I also knew that he did not want to be forced to carry out the punishments which the head overseer Smith would have meted out. Smith having been dismissed, that task now fell to Loving. So he had let us go. And given us the Senator's horse, to boot. Donating this animal to the cause was poetic justice.

The next question was how to find those Porters with whom we were meant to meet up later in the day, after *Courageous Red* had turned back to go home. The pain in my wrist, and I imagined also in Anna's arm, was starting to become too difficult to ignore, and so I sat back and pulled a bit on the left rein quickly, before settling my arm more tightly around Anna's waist. She got the idea,

and sat back, too, as she pulled on the bit lightly, and our horse seemed happy enough to come to a walk.

We both looked around, and I wondered how it was that we had neither seen nor heard anyone yet. Those gunshots must have been heard for miles, and these woods ought to be filled with men investigating, so close to the city.

“Don’t fret, Willow,” Anna squeezed my hand, “we are to be met very soon, by our next Porter, with helpers.”

Just then, we saw our next Conductor.

We went to a Quaker farm in Pennsylvania near the New Jersey border, where we joyously met up again with Adeleide and Dr. H. Though living further north, and thus a bit safer than they had been in Maryland, they were still in a delicate position.

They bestowed upon us more clothing, papers, money from their insurance settlement upon the house in Maryland, and even a lovely set of pearls. Astonishingly for me, Adeleide now gave me her full blessing to carry on our Peculiar Ruse, with Anna acting as my body servant.

A kind white farmer volunteered to drive our carriage as far as New York City, where we were to meet up with some old friends, and board a train. Brutus and his family had decided to

move to Toronto, Canada, and so we would all be able to travel together, if rather loosely. I would travel separately, passing for a white woman of means, thus riding in “the Ladies’ car”, where I was less likely to be challenged.

I had been provided with a cover story, and escorted by a white gentleman, pretending to be a distant cousin of mine, and who also pretended to have hired Anna, Brutus, Henrietta, and two of their children, to act as porters and attendants to both of us in our journey on this marvelous train ride.

I should say that it was marvelous for me, being allowed to sit in the car designated for ladies, which allowed only men accompanied by a lady to enter the car. My poor dear Anna, with forged Free Papers, Brutus, and his family, had to suffer the indignities of riding in the Colored section. They told me it was worth it to be able to escape more quickly than had ever been possible before, on this new train line directly up to English speaking British North America.

We saw each other whenever the train stopped for water or fuel, and at the few stops we made to allow everyone to get out and stretch their legs, for the journey was only one or two days, and discretion was of the utmost importance. Then, we crossed the Niagara Suspension Bridge.

We were met by a kind representative of The Acting Vigilance Committee, welcomed to British North America as free residents. Anna and I exchanged a look of gratitude.

We set about the task of finding work, making a living, and building a home, where I could finally cook that meal for Anna.

We were finally free.

The End